PMD: Defenders of Warmth

By: Arrowfoot the Dragon

Several humans, each with varying amounts of memory, wake up as pokémon in a pokéworld that is rapidly changing for the worse. As they go on their respective journeys, will they find out who they are and why they're there? Can they survive? -Gen 5 based-

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Prologue

What is it that defines a hero?

Wit? Courage? Accomplishments? Fate? A combination of all these things, or perhaps none of them at all?

"Let's go. All the others are just fraidy-meowths, you know? The dark never hurt anyone… Well, except when you get up in the middle of the night and stub your toe, but that doesn't count. You know, I would've done this even if you hadn't been up to it… But I'm still really glad you came."

Who is the truest friend?

The person who tries to be a friend to all? The one who has trouble being a friend to even one? Someone who clings blindly to another, full of true emotion but reluctant to embrace reason?

"I'm just going out to feed the cattle. It's too cold outside for more than one person to bother coming, though - I don't want all you little ones freezing into blocks of ice, after all."

"We aren't little anymore!"

"You are to me. Anyway, I'll be back in an hour! Don't start the movie without me!"

What is the soul?

Is it the Spirit that drives a person? Is it that which gives joy and sorrow to life? Is it the source of pain, or the spring from which happiness flows? Can anyone live without it?

"Sorry, but I've got to go. There's that big history test tomorrow, and I have to study. It's my lowest grade right now, and I don't want it dipping down any further."

"But you've got a solid 'A' in that class! Don't deny it, 'cuz you definitely showed me your progress report last week! Come on, surely you can hang out for a little while longer… We'll order pizza if you do!"

"No way. You know I don't do anything half-heartedly, especially when it comes to school. As tempting as pizza sounds, I really do need to study. But hey, you can come on over to my house after school tomorrow. I'll make cookies to make up for ditching early today, 'kay?"

What becomes of a soul devoid of purpose?

Does it shrivel up, like a raisin in the sun? Does it lose its individuality? Does it disappear? Or maybe…

"So you're saying if I do this, I'll finally know? Surely… There has to be another way…

… I'm terrified."

What is Fate?

Does it cause things to happen that shouldn't have been? Do we shape Fate, or does it shape us? Can we alter the past? The present? The future?

"No no no! MOVE, you stupid animal! I can't brake fast enou-"

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the SOUL

true FRIENDSHIP

the SPIRIT of a HERO

FATE

Above all else, tell me this: what drives us to continue moving forward, even when the Dragon hunts us in the Darkness and the Ice of Despair pierces us?

In those moments, for what do we live?

Author's Note: Hi everyone! Arrowfoot here. Did this prologue/teaser make sense?

…

You say it didn't? It made no sense whatsoever? Good. That's how it's supposed to be. Don't worry: starting with chapter 1, it'll start looking like a normal PMD fic, and therefore start making sense… To be honest, this prologue probably won't make sense for a long time. Regardless, I hope it at least intrigued you! The first chapter won't be out for a while, but if you are indeed intrigued, then add this fic to your alerts and get excited for what is to come!

Also, if you want a bit of an idea of what exactly it is that's coming, go to my fanfiction profile, then click my homepage! It will lead you to my deviantart account, which has a teaser/cover pic for this fanfic. ^_^

Vulpix

Chapter One: Vulpix

She awoke to find herself coughing loudly, desperately trying to purge her pained lungs of the icy water from which she had emerged. She could feel that her fur was drenched and that she was shivering uncontrollably, both from exhaustion and cold. But she paid those problems no mind. For now, she could only focus on trying to breathe during the brief lapses between coughing fits.

Some minutes passed like this, with no thought other than trying to stay alive.

Finally, all the water was expelled and she lay on the ground, trembling and miserable but alive. Her first thought was that she'd never been so happy to just breathe in her entire life; her second was that she'd never before been so cold in her life.

"If I'm never this wet and cold again, it'll be too soon," she mumbled to herself.

Her whisperings echoed around her in such an interesting way that she finally forced herself to open her eyes and sit up; even this act of pushing herself up with her forelegs seemed unbelievably laborious, and it was anther few moments after that when she managed to work up the energy to actually lift her head and look around.

The place she was in was marvelous, that much she saw at first glance. She automatically turned her head towards the light, and she found herself gazing into the depths of a vast cavern filled with stalactites and stalagmites and rough rocky columns that glowed green in the velvet blackness of the cave. The sight was eerie and beautiful at once, and as she recovered her breath, she continued to stare at the sight, transfixed.

Soon, the angry sound of rushing water registered in her brain, and she quite suddenly stood up and took a few frightened steps away from the river that rushed past her in the darkness. There were no glowing rocks either above or beyond it, making the water so dark that she couldn't see the other side of it. Judging by the echoes alone, it sounded as if it flowed along the edge of the chamber she was in, carving its way along the edge as if it knew that its merciless torrent had no right to be near the luminescent wonder of the rest of the cave.

It was only when she had awkwardly shuffled away from the river that she felt something was wrong. She couldn't quite put her paw on it, but things were definitely not as they should be. Whatever it was wasn't bad, but it was different.

She looked down at her body to make sure she hadn't lost a limb or something to the current. As far as she could tell, she was soaked, but otherwise unharmed. Her six reddish tails dragged limply against the ground, since it was too much effort to hold up that much wet fur; all four of her legs were sore but accounted for; she swiveled her ears back and forth, the smooth movement of them telling her they were in tact. With a quick shake of her head, she shook a shock of limp hair out of her eyes and took one last, confused glace at her body.

But… Have I always been like this?

She tried to think back. She didn't remember having four legs, or six tails, or big ears that could move. She crossed her eyes and, looking down at her nose, didn't think she'd ever had a muzzle before, either.

But if I wasn't this creature, then what was I?

To her annoyance, she couldn't answer her own question. She couldn't remember being this… *thing*, but nor could she remember ever being anything else.

She sank to the ground again, burying her head beneath her paws. "Oh, what's going on?" she groaned to herself. "Where am I? What am I? *Who* am I!"

Her breathing grew quick and panicked as she realized that she had answers to absolutely none of these questions. She didn't recognize this cave, but she couldn't remember any place else; she didn't recognize her body, yet she couldn't remember ever having lived without four legs or six tails or her soft fur; she knew she should have a name, but nothing at all came to mind.

"Now what do we have here?" a deep, gravelly voice suddenly said, interrupting her panic. "A little vulpix lost in the dark? I bet I can help you out."

Before she could react, she felt herself being lifted up by loose skin at the scruff of her neck.

"Ouch! Hey, let me go!" she said as sharp nails dug into her skin, easily keeping a hold of her as she struggled to get away from the monster that held her. She tried to turn her head to get a good look at it, but all she saw from her position was a boulder where she though her attacker should be.

"Now, now, don't be like that, sweetie. I'm just trying to help," the creature said as he tightened his grip, a malicious tone in his voice contradicting the would-be kind words. He shifted his arm so that she was looking at him in the face, and she realized that the boulder she had glimpsed was, in fact, the monster. He was, in essence, a giant sphere of stone; only his tan-colored legs, arms, and head showed him to be anything more than that. His limbs were short and his neck-less head sat towards the center of his body, giving him a very squat appearance that further detracted from the rough look of his fissure-scored body.

The amnesiac girl quickly ceased her wriggling. She was exhausted and confused, and she saw that struggling against the much larger creature was useless. "Please, please let me go," she begged, her

voice quieter than before. She didn't know what to do, but she knew she wanted to get away from the terrifying river and this frightening piece of living rock.

"Now, why would I go and do that, sweetheart?" he said with an evil grin. "There's no need to worry. The name's Golem, and I'm gonna take real good care of you, don't you worry. A cute thing like you probably has a nice momma waitin' to reward whoever brings back her precious daughter, don't you think? Why don't you tell me where your from, and I'll escort you home."

She shook her head, which only caused his sharp little claws to pierce farther into the skin of her scruff. "Please, just let me go," she said again. "I don't know where I'm from."

The smile left Golem's face. "Well, that there's a shame, now, ain't it? You know, I hear that nutjobs will buy vulpix tails for a lot of money… And what's that around your neck?" He lifted her up a bit higher to get a better look. She squeezed her eyes closed and stayed limp, hoping this all was just one bad nightmare. She didn't want her tails cut off. That sounded painful, and terrifying, and she didn't even know if it was something that she could live through.

As she hoped and hoped that she would wake up any second, the rock monster fingered whatever hung from her neck and whistled appreciatively. "That's a nice bit o' nevermeltice. You're a fire type, ain't ya? Then you won't be needing that - I'll take it."

She didn't know what was at her neck, nor did she understand what nevermeltice was. All she understood was the pain as her tormentor suddenly used his free hand to try to rip the necklace off. As he pulled, the cord around her neck tightened and she screamed. "Please, please stop!" she pleaded, more loudly than before.

"Why… won't… this… thing… come… off!" Golem shouted angrily as he pulled ever tighter.

Something warm dripped down her neck; she guessed it was blood. "Please, stop it! You're hurting me!"

"I'd say that's quite enough, rock head!" a feminine voice yelled from somewhere nearby.

Golem kept his hold on her neck, but dropped her to his side so that he could focus his attention on the two small, lithe creatures that were approaching. As the amnesiac girl twisted her head to watch them come, she saw that the two of them were very similar to each other, and that their body shapes were roughly the same as her own, though both were somewhat larger than her.

The one that had spoken seemed vibrant in the dim glow, her own palette of yellows and leafy greens accentuated by the similar hue of the light. She had leaves instead of ears and a tail, though, and more leaves dangled from several places on her somewhat stocky yellow body. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes narrowed as she glared angrily at Golem.

"Now, sis, do calm down," the creature next to her said, her voice at once both kind and jokingly condescending. She was somewhat slimmer and more dainty than her companion, her light blue body reminiscent of a delicate ice sculpture suddenly come alive. Ribbon-like decorations hung from the almost hatlike part of her head, and her tail looked similarly thin and fragile. "No need to be angry. We'll simply defeat this brute and help that poor little vulpix."

Vulpix? the girl thought. *Is that what I am? Golem said it earlier, and-*

Her thoughts were cut off as Golem tightened his grip again and she yelped in pain. "Tch! Like you could beat me that easily?" Golem said. "Come a step closer and I'll drop the kid into the river, you conceited guild members! You let me leave, or the vulpix dies!"

Vulpix screamed more loudly than ever as the Golem held her over the torrent of water. As soon as she saw the water rushing beneath her and felt its cold touch as it caught the tips of her tails, her brain

stopped functioning properly. She panicked. After all, *this* was her first ever memory, the memory of almost dying. The river was a monster that wanted to destroy her, trying to leech the life out of her as it pulled her into its depths. She couldn't even stand to be near it, and she definitely couldn't stand being dangled above it, liable to drop if the two new creatures made a move that Golem didn't like.

The leafy creature tensed further. "Let her go, Golem! She's not a part of this! Battle like a real pokémon, you son of skuntank!"

"Sis, there's a young one here - you really ought to watch your tongue," the icy one said, completely calm in spite of the situation. "I would think that you should know that better than me. Besides, there's no need to worry. After all, we won't be letting you get away with this, Mr. Rockhead. If we let you leave with the vulpix, you'll just kill her later, won't you? Or, judging by what you were saying earlier, at least you'll maim her. We aren't going to let you get away with that."

"That so, Glaceon?" Golem asked, ignoring the panicked screams and struggles of his captive. "Then it seems we're at stuck. You attack, and I drop the vulpix. You don't let me leave, and we stay here until someone does something."

"On the contrary, there's no such problem," the glaceon replied, her soothing voice gliding under the strident, echoing yells of the terrified vulpix. "If the vulpix will die either way, then we have no issues with attacking you. With that in mind-"

"But Claire, we can't! That vulpix-"

The glaceon glanced over to her partner. "Do be calm, sis. As I was saying, Golem, we have no reason not to attack you, and you have no reason not to drop the vulpix. *However*, if you let that poor little dear go, then we'll give you ten seconds to make the first move of the battle. Deal?"

A rumbling sort of growl came from within Golem's body, like two rocks scraping against each other. "… fine. Deal."

The vulpix felt herself thrown forward, and stars danced before her eyes as she slammed against one of the glowing pillars before slumping to the ground. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open as she watched in stunned amazement as her persecutor suddenly jumped up and landed hard, causing the whole cave to tremble. She was knocked back and forth by the quake, wincing more than she should have for being knocked from side to side. But there was something about the sudden phenomena that pained her beyond the simple shaking. It was… the earthiness of it. She could think of no other explanation. It wasn't the motion that pained her, but rather the very nature of the shaking that hurt.

When the shaking subsided and the vulpix was finally able to lift her head, the leafy and icy creatures were already on their feet. Only the blue one looked any worse for wear.

"That all, ya jerk?" the leafy one said. "Our turn now!"

Swinging the broad leaf that sprouted from her forehead, a flurry of smaller, sharper leaves was sent flying forward; and, alongside them, a beam of faintly glowing white light shot from just in front of the icy pokémon's mouth. Only some of the leaves hit the boulder monster, but those that did obviously pained him considerably, cutting into his thick, rocky hide. The beam of light, meanwhile, hit him just above his head, creating a chunk of ice where it made contact.

Golem growled again and, tucking his head and limbs as close to his body as possible, began rolling forward at a remarkable speed. The leafy creature dashed to get out of the way, while the icy quadruped stood her ground and fired off another of her white beams, this time at the ground directly in the rolling boulder's path. Golem rolled straight into the patch of ice that formed and veered off course, slamming at full speed into one of the thickest glowing pillars.

The living rock fell to the ground, let his limbs hang limp at his sides, and didn't stir.

"And that's the first rule of battling, little sis," the icy one said to her companion. "Always use your opponent's strength against him."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," the leafy one said, verbally brushing the matter aside.

The icy one flicked her tail, satisfied. "You seemed awfully protective of that little vulpix, you know."

"Oh, right! Her!" the leafy creature said, turning to look at the wide-eyed and very confused girl. "I guess she just reminds me of my kid. Anyway…" she strode over to the vulpix, who looked at her silently. She was still in shock of what had just happened.

Leaves don't just fly through the air and cut like that normally, do they? And earthquakes can't happen on command… right?

Yet she wasn't afraid of the creature that approached her; she was numb from the action, but she understood that this pair had saved her from the creature that would have cut off her tails and drowned her in a river.

"Hey, Vulpix. How'd you end up here? The big bad buy take you from your family?"

She shook her head. "Um… no. No. I woke up here… I think I was tossed ashore by that river."

" *That* river?" the icy one said as she came over, glancing over to the flowing waters at the side of the cave. "No one knows where that river even originates. It's so fast that even the best water pokémon can't travel it. How'd you end up in it?" Before the vulpix could answer, the icy creature continued, "It's a miracle you even survived. So, where are you from? We can help you back home, if you're lost."

The vulpix shook her head again, her wet locks of hair once again getting in her eyes. "I… I don't know. I don't know where I come from."

"Did you just hatch?" the leafy one asked.

"No, that can't be it, sis," the icy one replied before the vulpix could answer. "All her tails are grown. Newly-hatched vulpix only have one. She's gotta be at least a week or two old, and she looks older than that… You think maybe she hit her head in the river?"

The leafy creature seemed to think this likely. "Well, did you, Vulpix?" she asked the vulpix. "That might make it hard for you to remember stuff, if you sustained serious injury."

"My head feels fine," the vulpix said, standing up finally. She was still trembling; all she wanted to do was rest. "But, um… I don't remember anything." She felt like she was making excuses, and hated herself for it. But there was no other way. She had no idea how to act or what to do. "I just woke up here at the side of the river, and that thing came while I was still recovering. Before that… nothing."

Her two rescuers looked at each other, confused scowls on their faces.

"Nothing? Nothing at all?" the icy one asked.

The tips of her tails burnt with shame as she shook her head. Refusing to meet their eyes but desperately wanting to clear one thing up, she said, "You and Golem called me Vulpix… Is that my name?"

The duo looked at each other incredulously. "You mean you don't even know your species name?"

"Is that what it is? Then why did you use it as my name?" she asked. She got the feeling that she wasn't used to being called by any sort

of species name. It seemed impersonal and strange to her.

Flustered but sympathetic, the leafy one said, "Well, yes, it's your species name. Most pokémon go by their species names with pokémon they don't know well. So you can call me Leafeon, and my sister is Glaceon. That jerk who was threatening you is Golem. Most pokémon have personal names, too, that they go by when around friends. Do you not even know that?"

The vulpix continued to look at the ground. "No. And what's a pokémon?"

This seemed too much for the pair. Leafeon answered, stumbling over her words - "Well, it's, I guess… Well, it's all of us. Anything that talks and lives. I guess there's the world around us with rocks and trees and everything, and then there's us. Pokémon." Then, turning to her sister, she said, "We've got to take her back with us. She's half dead as it is, and she doesn't know a thing to boot. She's doomed if we leave her here."

Vulpix didn't mind that they were talking about her as if she wasn't there. She was swaying on her feet, nearly ready to topple over.

"I couldn't agree more, sis," Glaceon replied. "Let's get her out of here. The guildmaster will know what to do with her."

As they walked back, Vulpix was in such a tired stupor that she barely took in what was going on. She remembered that she was carried on Golem's back, and Golem himself had his hands stuck together in ice so that he was limited in his actions, if not completely helpless. Even if he had tried something, Leafeon and Glaceon marched right behind him, ready to knock him out should he take so much as a step out of line.

She tried to rouse herself when they arrived at wherever it was they were going, but even then all she did was end up asleep on her feet, just barely able to keep her eyes open as her two kind rescuers

nudged her on. She half heard the conversation when she was brought in front of two new creatures - pokémon, she guessed they were called - and then she was led to another room with another pokémon in it. After that, she passed out in a bed of soft straw and grass, grateful to finally be able to sleep in peace.

When she finally fully woke up, she felt well-rested and ready to take on the day. She rubbed her bleary eyes with a paw, then yawned as she got up and stretched.

"Oh, hey, nice to see you up!"

Vulpix started, not having realized that someone was in the room. She stood up straight and looked over to see a squat green pokémon on the other side of the small room. His compact body was covered in strange dark green shapes, and on his back was a leafy bulb that nearly doubled his height. In addition to the regular, dark green shapes that were obviously a natural pattern, he had a number of small, angry-red blotches on his hide, as if he'd recently been burned.

The pokémon grinned cheerfully at his surprised roommate. "The name's Bulbasaur, but you can call me Sage, if you want."

"I'm, uh, Vulpix," she said, struggling to remember even that much. "Just Vulpix. Nice to meet you, Bulbasaur." From what she remembered Glaceon and Leafeon saying, the second name was more personal; for now, she thought it wise to stick with species names. Especially since that was the only name she had for herself.

The bulbasaur's smile faded slightly. "Oh, sorry, didn't mean to be too casual or anything. I just-"

"No, it's not that!" Vulpix interrupted, wanting to stop any misunderstanding before it started. "I just don't remember my name. Sorry."

Bulbasaur looked at her, confused but intrigued. "Can't remember your name? How does that work?" Then, realizing that maybe he was being rude, he said, "I mean, if you want to tell me, that is! Sorry, I guess I shouldn't be prying. My parents taught me better than that."

Vulpix smiled a bit, taking a liking to this guy. He wasn't very tactful, it seemed, but he was nice enough. And it was someone nice that she needed right now. "I don't really know how it happened," she admitted. "When I woke up, I'd washed ashore at a river in a cave, and I couldn't remember anything about me."

"That glaceon and leafeon who brought you in told me that you'd washed ashore in Glowstone Caverns, but they didn't tell me that you had no memory. That stinks… Sorry to hear it. But you know, I bet it'll come back to you eventually. How did you like Glowstone Caverns, by the way? I've never been there, but I've heard it's beautiful - the paras and parasect tend to the moss and fungi that grow on the stalactites and stalagmites, making them glow. Right? I bet it was awesome." Bulbasaur's big eyes seemed to twinkle at the thought.

"Uh, yeah, I guess," Vulpix said. "I didn't get much of a chance to look around. Some pokémon came and attacked me… Glaceon and Leafeon saved me."

Bulbasaur's eyes widened. "Really? Wow, you had an eventful day! No wonder you slept for so long! When you got here yesterday, they told me to let you rest as long as you needed to… I can understand why."

There was a pause during which neither pokémon spoke. Then, in a loud voice, Bulbasaur suddenly burst out, "Oh, sorry! Where are my manners! I know all about you, but I haven't told you anything about myself!"

Vulpix started to say it was fine and that he didn't have to, but the bulbasaur was already speaking again.

"I come from Emerald Forest - I guess if you lost your memory, you probably don't know where that is. It's here in the Western Guild's jurisdiction, but it's kind of a ways away. My mom and dad are the caretakers of the forest. They're both venusaur, and they're the strongest pokémon you'll ever meet, except for maybe the guildmasters. Anyway, there was a fire there, and I got separated from my parents. That's how I ended up here. I was just brought here yesterday, actually; I got here just a little while before you."

She would've said that she was sorry about the fire, and that it must have been frightening. But he didn't seem at all put down by the retelling, and so she held her tongue. *What should I do here? How do I respond to hearing something like that? I just don't know anymore. I don't have anything to compare to.*

"I think it was sort of for the best, anyway," Bulbasaur continued, oblivious to Vulpix's quiet indecision. "I'd never been out of the forest before yesterday, and now I've been thinking that maybe it was time for me to leave he forest, you know? I really want to see the world. Emerald Forest was great, but there have got to be so many other cool places. Like Glowstone Cave. And like this place! This place is great! You haven't even had a chance to look around, have you?"

She shook her head as she glanced around the room. It was a simple little space carved out of smooth, jet black rock, with an open doorway to the hallway. There were no windows, yet there was light; Vulpix looked up to see glowing threads of something embedded in the rocky ceiling, creating a luminescent web that shed a soft, even light on the room.

"Isn't that cool?" Bulbasaur asked, following her gaze. "Every morning, the guildmaster and deputy send a shock of electricity into a big stone of steel in the ceiling of the main gathering space. And then little webs of steel carry it to everywhere else in the guild. It stays bright the entire day, and then dims towards night when everyone sleeps. They say the great Cobalion himself made the guild that way." Bulbasaur suddenly frowned, perhaps seeing the

slight scowl of unhappiness on Vulpix's face. "But you probably don't know who Cobalion is, do you?"

That wasn't what had been troubling Vulpix. She had desperately been trying to think back to remember anything before waking up in that cave. But all she could remember was being pulled down and down into the freezing darkness of the river. Shaking herself from her reverie, she answered, "To be honest, I don't even know what a guild is. Until Leafeon explained it to me, I didn't even know I was a vulpix, or what a pokémon was."

"Guess I've got my work cut out for me, then," Bulbasaur said, though not unkindly. "Well, why don't we walk around, and maybe I can answer some stuff for you. Most teams have already left to do their jobs for the day, so we'll pretty much have the place to ourselves. Come on! I'll show you around."

He led the way out into the hallway, which was lined with rooms similar to theirs, nearly all of which were empty.

"So, the guilds… Well, there are four guilds all told. We're at the Western Guild. The Four Warriors of Justice founded them *ages* ago, when the weather went out of control and natural disasters began to strike the land. They helped any pokémon that needed help, and defended against any hostile pokémon. With them leading the guilds, the disasters were managed and pokémon fell back into a sort of routine, even though disasters still happen a lot.

"Like I said, Cobalion was the one who founded this guild - he was sort of the leader of the other three warriors. He had an iron-strong determination, and he made this place to mirror that. I was told that he and the other warriors were still leading the guilds up until ten years ago or something, when I wasn't born yet. And then they all just disappeared. Since then, other pokémon have stepped up to lead the guilds and help any pokémon in need. Pretty noble, huh?"

Vulpix nodded, though her mind was split between listening to Bulbasaur, learning her way through the rocky passages, and still

trying to think about her past.

Bulbasaur didn't mind her silence; it gave him more of a chance to talk, after all. "So do you not even have any idea where that necklace of yours came from? It's really cool."

It took Vulpix a few moments to realize that Bulbasaur had asked her a question. She felt the weight of the icy pendant at her neck, and she could sense the coldness that clung to her chest. "Nope. No idea where it came from," she said, twisting her head to get a glimpse of the quartzlike ice. "But it won't come off."

"Really? That's weird," Bulbasaur said. "Well, whatever. Guess it doesn't matter. Oh, hey, we made it to the main gathering area! This is where all the guild members gather in the mornings before going off on their missions! It's cool, right?" Bulbasaur's eyes glimmered with excitement and wonder as they entered the massive chamber, big enough that Vulpix guessed that a dozen golem could've been stacked one on top of each other and still not reach the ceiling. Many other passageways branched off from the main chamber, one of which shone brightly with the daylight that lay just beyond it. However, by far brighter than that was the massive circular light in the ceiling, flowing with energy that cackled and sparked from the surface every now and then. It was just as wide as Vulpix was long, and thousands of delicate filaments radiated out from it and towards the passageways, trailing through the ceiling like little passageways of light.

It was beautiful, but Vulpix's heart still wasn't in it as she admired the golden paths of light.

"Oh, hey hey hey! Zebby, go that way! It's Bulby and Vulpy!" A sharp, high-pitched voice suddenly echoed out of one of the adjoining passages.

Bulbasaur seemed to straighten up and tense as Vulpix looked over curiously at the pair of pokémon walking into the light. One was a tall, black pokémon that walked on four legs, and he was covered

from head to hoof in jagged white stripes. His head held two spiked white protrusions, and a ridge of similar protrusions traced his spine before ending in a tail with an especially spiky burst at its tip. He looked down at Vulpix with stern, unforgiving eyes.

The other pokémon, however, was his opposite in every way. She was a tiny, white and black pokémon with big ears, and an almost rudder-like black tail, and yellow cirlces on her cheeks. She entered while riding the other pokémon, but as soon as they were inside the room, she spread the yellow flaps of skin at her sides and glided down to meet Vulpix and Bulbasaur.

"Hi hi hi you two! Nice to see you up and about!" she said quickly and enthusiastically. "Did you two eat? Well did ya, did ya?" She flicked her ears and tail almost constantly as she talked, and practically bounced from foot to foot with overflowing enthusiasm.

Bulbasaur - who, as far as Vulpix could tell, was stunned by the pokémon's overwhelming energy - stuttered out a reply. "Oh, um, no ma'am, we haven't. Vulpix just woke up, and I was showing her around."

Ma'am?

"Then you guys should go grab something to eat NOW!" She jumped up at the last word, little sparks fizzling on her cheeks. "I bet dear Heatmor still has some roasted pecha berries left over from breakfast, for sure for sure! Go go go go GO! Just go right through there, through the dining room, and to the kitchen, yep yep!"

"Um, yes ma'am!" Bulbasaur said.

"And call me Emolga, not this ma'am business, Bulby!" the hyperactive pokémon said. "Ma'am is too formal, too formal! Anyway, me and Zebby have to go go go, so you two have fun!"

Before either Bulbasaur or Vulpix could say anything more, Emolga jumped into the air in a mighty leap and glided quickly down another

hallway.

The tall, stern looking pokémon sighed and addressed the two speechless pokémon. "You'll have to excuse her. She gets a bit excited when there are new pokémon around. You two can carry on now."

At a trot, he followed down the passageway that Emolga had just disappeared down.

Vulpix looked to Bulbasaur. "Um… Do you know them?"

Bulbasaur looked at her incredulously. "We *both* know them! You were taken to meet them before you were brought to my room! That's Guildmaster Emolga and her deputy, Zebstrika! They're two of the strongest pokémon around! I've heard that people don't even challenge Emolga to battles anymore, because she decimates every opponent she faces before they even know what's happening. Only Guildmaster Abomasnow of the Northern Guild is said to be able to best her in battle."

"Battle?" she said, thinking that Leafeon and Glaceon had used that word specifically the other day; it seemed to carry a certain significance past Vulpix's most basic understanding of it. "Is that what those two who rescued me did to fight off Golem?"

"Yeah, it is. Of course, we do it for fun, too. To see who's strongest, and who's improving the most, and just for the heck of it," Bulbasaur explained. And then, with pride tingeing his voice, he added, "I'm actually pretty strong, if I do say so myself. Inherited it from my parents, I guess. I was one of the strongest pokémon in the forest, 'specially when you consider that I'm not all that old in comparison to a lot of the pokémon I battled."

"Yeah…" Vulpix said, already not really paying attention again.

Bulbasaur heard her tone of voice and moved in front of her so that he could look her in the eye. "Something wrong? You seem

distracted."

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

He narrowed his gaze, obviously not believing her.

"Really, it's nothing," she insisted. "I'm just… I'm trying to figure out who I am. It's bugging me. But I can't figure it out… Everything's just a big blank."

"Hmm… Well, I can't help you with memories, but I bet I can already tell you a little about yourself!" Bulbasaur said encouragingly.

Vulpix tilted her head to one side, curious. "Really? Like what?"

"You carry yourself really straight and properly, almost like a princess, for one," Bulbasaur said.

"I do?" she asked, looking down at herself as if to examine her own posture. She noticed for the first time that her tails, now dry, were curled up beautifully, and her fur faintly shone in the light. Likewise, she saw that the hair on her head was no longer in her eyes, and she briefly raised a paw to feel it perfectly curled atop her head. *I carry myself like a princess? I doubt it. Maybe my fur just makes me look a bit more regal.*

"Yeah, you really do!" Bulbasaur said. "I bet you grew up around someone who had that same sort of posture. I bet it was someone that everyone looked up to, too. And let's see… What else… Well, you care about who you really are. If I lost my memories, I'd probably wonder how it happened, then move on. So that has to say something about your spirit."

"Spirit?"

"You know, like your soul or something. I've heard it go by a few names. But it's the essence of who you are. There are a bunch of old nursery rhymes my parents told me about it. They always had

morals to them… Like, I remember one of them. The point of it was that your species doesn't determine what you're like; rather, it's what you're like that determines what you're born as… So, like, maybe the guildmaster wouldn't be an emolga if she wasn't naturally hyper, and maybe you wouldn't be a vulpix if you weren't naturally… Well, I don't really know if vulpix are associated with any specific character traits. But you know what I mean? The fact that you're Vulpix tells a lot about you. It's an expression of the spirit…"

He trailed off momentarily. Then, with a sheepish grin, he said, "But you know, I'm not really a philosophical sort of pokémon… I've never really thought about it much before. Maybe I should have… You know what?"

"What?" Vulpix asked, struck by his suddenly more reflective attitude.

"This all almost seems like one of those stories you hear as a kid, about humans stealing you away if you wander from home."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Humans? What are they?" she asked, with just a little bit more urgency than was natural.

A vine emerged from just under his bulb, and he used it to scratch his head thoughtfully before saying, "You know, I'm really not certain. They aren't any sort of pokémon, that's for sure. There are a bunch of children's stories about 'em, though. A lot of times they're mean and do terrible things, but sometimes they're nice and help pokémon become more powerful. I guess they can be good or bad, just like pokémon."

Though Bulbasaur's explanation did little to help Vulpix, her heart was racing. *Humans… Humans… That's what I was, wasn't it? I'm sure of it! It seems so right! I wasn't always a vulpix. I was a human before this! But if humans are just fairy tales, then where did I come from? And what did I even look like? Even knowing what I was doesn't really help me if I can't remember what that thing is. I wonder… Of the two kinds of humans that Bulbasaur mentioned, as I*

the good kind of human, or the bad kind? I'd like to think I was the good kind. That'd be nice…

"Vulpix? Vulpix! Hello? Are you there?"

"Wh-what?" Vulpix said, emerging from her musings.

Bulbasaur grinned. "You spaced out for a minute there. Anyway, I was just saying… You know, I don't really want to go back home. I want to see more places, like this guild and Glowstone Caverns and all the other amazing sights in the world. And you, um, don't really have any place to go. So I was wondering… You wanna form a team with me and join the guild? We'll definitely get to do bunches of cool things and see really awesome places, and maybe we'll even stumble across where you came from! And we can both train and get stronger that way, too, which is always good."

Vulpix didn't answer for a moment, and Bulbasaur took this as reluctance. "I mean, it's not like a super big commitment or anything!" he added to encourage her. "If you don't like it, we can always quit. It's no big deal. I just thought that maybe it'd be fun, and it would mean that we're at least not mooching off the guild while we stay here."

Vulpix smiled. She wasn't sure why they needed to form some sort of team to join the guild, but she guessed she'd figure that out later. As for now… Well, Bulbasaur was right. She had no place to go, and she was still trying to understand this world that she, a human, had found herself thrown into. And Bulbasaur, overly-talkative though he was, seemed as good a friend as any to help her figure out what was going on. For now, she'd keep to herself that she was human; she didn't want to freak him out, or make him think that she was crazy. But other than keeping that secret, teaming up seemed like a good idea.

"Sounds like a plan," she said. "And thanks."

Bulbasaur grinned right back at her. "Thanks? For what? We're gonna be the best rescue team ever - I've gotta thank you for being the one to make that possible! But we've got to think of a name… How 'bout Team Rebirth? Since we're both sort of starting out on new lives. 'Cuz you don't remember your old life and I'm finally starting on making my own life for the first time, That sounds, great! You think so too, right?"

Vulpix replied in the affirmative and allowed herself a giggle at his enthusiasm, even if she didn't exactly share it. But the giggle was soon interrupted by the loud grumbling of her stomach.

Bulbasaur laughed. "You probably haven't eaten in nearly a day, have you? Well, come on, let's do as Guildmaster Emolga suggested and get us some roasted pecha berries! Follow me - Heatmor ought to be this way!"

That evening, Vulpix awoke in the middle of the night, thinking that maybe she couldn't sleep because she'd slept for so long upon arriving at the guild. She soon heard a sort of muffled cry, though, and realized that the noise had been what had woken her up. She looked across the room to see Bulbasaur tossing and turning in his sleep, obviously in distress.

He was so happy during the day, Vulpix thought groggily. *What is he having nightmares about? Should I wake him up? Hmm…*

She felt as if she should go over to him and do something to soothe him. She wanted to lie down next to him, so that even in his sleep he'd know that he wasn't alone. But she couldn't bring herself to do that, or even to call out and wake him from whatever horror he was living in.

What does that say about me? she wondered as she began to drift back off to sleep. *Not even a good enough friend to get up and help the one who helped me through my first real day as a pokémon. I'm the worst…*

… *Maybe I really was the bad sort of human…*

And then she fell asleep once more, drifting into her own nightmares of soul-numbing coldness and black waters and shadowy creatures that stole young pokémon from their dens.

Arrowfoot here, with my usual post-chapter author's note! Most author's notes will not be this long, but since this is the first real chapter, I need to get a lot of things out of the way.

First of all, some quick notes about the story. Chapters will usually be about five to six thousand words. There will often be chapters like this exceeding 6000 words (minus this author's note, which pushes it well over 7000), and there may occasionally be chapters below five thousand words. Chapters will be added every Thursday, and that should stay very consistent. I think in the 58 chapters of Language of Life, there were only two or three chapters that I postponed.

Next matter of business: I'm planning on drawing pictures for every chapter and uploading them to my deviantart account, a link to which you can find on my profile! I'm no good at drawing right now, I'll admit, but I'm curious to see if I can get any better with practice. I'll post links to each pic under this story's section of my fanfic profile, so you're more than welcome to check them out, if you're interested. ^_^

Formatting things: as you could probably tell, italics will be used for thoughts, and maybe for telepathic communication later on. I used rows of colons to indicate time breaks, as you also probably could tell.

Anyway, about this chapter specifically: would everyone please give a warm welcome to Team Rebirth (a.k.a Team Angst)! This will be by far the most serious team of the fic, as well as the team that most mirrors the actual games. However, if you've read the description of the story, then you already know that Vulpix isn't the only human stuck in this world. You've got two more humans out and about, so

get ready to meet them in the next two chapters. ^_^ I've never written a story that switches between multiple main characters (which is exactly what's about to happen), so I'd appreciate it if you let me know how that ends up working out for you as you read.

And please review! I always appreciate it, even if you're only telling me my writing flaws or even if you only review to say that there was nothing that stood out to you specifically about the chapter, but you're nonetheless keeping up with the story. And to those of you who are reading this because you read The Language of Life, I thank you for your continued interest and support, and I hope you end up enjoying this story even more than The Language of Life!

Hope that everyone liked the first chapter! Chapter Two: Cody is coming up next!

Cody

Chapter Two: Cody

"But I don't *wanna* get up," Cody mumbled, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to stay asleep despite the chilled water that he felt flowing past his tail. The tail momentarily flicked out of the water in response to his discomfort, but it fell right back into the current, drawn back downwards like some fish unable to escape its watery home.

Cody groaned in drowsy annoyance and turned over in his sleep, only to find his legs and stomach drenched in the chilly waters. He yelped in surprise and quickly darted back onto the dry part of the sandbar he had been sleeping on, instinctually shaking his body like a dog to rid his brown fur of the dampness.

It was only then that he realized that he wasn't supposed to have brown fur, nor was he supposed to have a tail and walk on four legs.

"What… Dear God, what is this?" he said as he froze, turning in a circle as he looked in confused wonder at his short, raccoon-like body and the jagged patterns of fur that covered it. "Isn't this from that show my younger siblings watch? Pokémon? What kind of messed up dream is this?"

But as soon as he said this, he realized that he didn't think it was a dream. Not really. It all felt too real. He never had dreams like this; he wasn't creative enough to have dreams outside of the mundane. And this was *far* from mundane.

No. It has to be a dream. There's no other explanation.

He raised his eyes to his surroundings to try to find something - anything - that could prove what his logic told him to be true. If this was a dream, something had to give it away. He found himself gazing on a vast expanse of slow-moving water that stretched

outwards on all sides of him, nearly as far as he could see. Though admittedly, that wasn't all that far; his eyes were barely above ground level due to his stout body. Sandbars both bigger and smaller than his own dotted the clear, shallow waters, and in the far distance to one side of him, he could see massive hills that seemed to gently bubble up from the otherwise completely flat horizon. The bright midday sun made the crystal water glimmer, further beatifying the scene.

It truly was a wonderful sight, and one that Cody would have enjoyed more had he not been desperately looking for signs of falsehood in the crystal clear currents and vibrant blue sky.

Nothing truly odd being immediately apparent, Cody took a deep breath and tried to sit down. However, he quickly found that due to his relatively stubby legs, such a position would be nearly impossible; instead, he stood back on his paws and began slowly pacing up and down his little island of sand.

"All right, I just need to calm down," he said aloud. The sound of his own voice soothed him a little. It sounded just like he remembered it should, and even one bit of normalcy was something he was grateful for. "So I'm a… a zigzagoon? Was that what this pokémon was called? Now I wish I'd paid more attention to that show… But if this isn't a game, and I don't think it's a dream… Well, what's going on?"

He sighed and, without meaning to, pinned his ears against his head as he tried to concentrate. "What's the last thing I remember? How'd I end up here, and how'd I end up like this?"

But no matter how hard he tried, couldn't remember anything that could help. He could seemingly recall everything about his life - the farm, his parents, all his little siblings - but it was all scattered abut. He couldn't think about his life linearly; everything came in glimpses of seemingly random memories. And absolutely none of those glimpses had anything to do with his current situation, as far as he could tell.

Suddenly, something laying on a nearby sandbar caught his eye, and before he could even think about it he was splashing through the water towards it, swimming when the water got too deep for his tiny body to run in. As soon he reached his destination, he shook himself free of water before strolling over to the item and inspecting it.

The little lump he'd seen turned out to be a plain blue scarf made of a soft, silky sort of material.

"It looks kinda familiar…" he said to himself. In a moment of revelation, he continued, "Looks just like that my little sisters made for me, doesn't it?" Then, shaking his head suddenly, he said more loudly, "What am I doing? I have to figure out what's going on, not worry about some stupid scarf!"

But already his eyes had wandered back to the velvety blue scarf. "But if it's just lying here, I can have it, right?" He looked around curiously, wanting to make sure that someone wasn't actually nearby. He spotted some fish - goldeen, he thought - swimming past his sandbar, and now that he looked more closely, he saw various figures wandering the sandbars of the shallow waters. But none of those creatures were anywhere near him, so Cody guessed that the scarf probably wasn't theirs.

"Finders keepers, right?" he said to himself as he slipped his head into the folds and managed to get the long piece of fabric around his neck. "I kind of like it. Reminds me of home. Anyway, back to the matter at hand… Whether this is a dream or not, there have to be humans around, right? There were humans in the pokémon show, I know. So maybe they'd know what's going on?" He sighed and shook his head. "This is all just too weird. It has to be a dream. It has to. Even though it seems like it's real. Dreams always seem like they're real, so I probably just can't tell the difference."

Something else caught his eye, and Cody turned his head to see that the goldeen were swimming as close to the sandbar as they could, paddling against the current with just enough force so that they stayed in one spot. They were looking at him with what he

imagined to be condescension. They quickly sped up and left as soon as they were noticed, and Cody felt embarrassment at talking to himself wash over them.

But they're just fish, right? Why should I be embarrassed about them overhearing me? They can't understand me. Even if I'm not human, I'm still a completely different species from them.

His musings were disturbed when he heard something large rushing through the water, and he lifted his head to see that one of the figures that had been in the distance was running towards him. Now that it was closer, he saw that its head wasn't all that different from those of the bulls he was so used to dealing with due to living on a farm; its body, however, was reminiscent of a bison, with very powerful, heavy-set front limbs.

Tauros, isn't it? Cody chuckled to himself. *If I can remember the names of random pokémon, then my little siblings definitely make me watch way too much TV with them* .

Cody quickly sobered up as he realized that the tauros was still running directly towards him, and by the looks of it, he was angry. Cody stood his ground, doubting that he could outrun something so many times his size, but thinking that he'd be able to dart out of the way at just the last second if it came to that.

However, when the tauros finally reached the island of sand that Cody was on, he dug his hooves into the sand and came to a halt, though he continued to snort and whip his three tails and toss his head.

That's an angry bull if I've ever seen one, Cody thought warily. *I have enough trouble dealing with the bulls at home when they're angry. How am I supposed to deal with a super-powered bull when I'm the size of a raccoon?*

Still pawing the sand restlessly, the tauros locked his eyes on Cody and bellowed, "Thief! That's my scarf, sticky paws! How dare you

steal it from me!"

Cody was just as stunned as if one of his own bulls from home had suddenly started talking to him, especially since he was still in a bemused state from everything else that was going on. To his credit, though, he was only shocked into silence for a second or two before he replied, "Steal? I didn't steal it! This thing was lying on the ground, so I picked it up! *You* shouldn't go dropping your stuff at random places!"

The tauros snorted. "How dare you! You took it, and I know it!"

"Listen, I'll give your scarf back to you, all right?" Cody said as he slipped the scarf off, seriously annoyed. He really wanted to keep the scarf just to bug anyone who would make such a stupid accusation, but he knew that would probably just get him killed. "But quit being such a jerk about it! I didn't steal the stupid scarf! You must have been careless enough to drop it."

"I will not stand to be insulted by a thief!" The tauros said before quite suddenly lowering his head and charging. Cody, caught off guard, was caught between his horns and sent flying to the next sandbar over. If not for the soft sand, he probably would have broken a bone in the fall; as it was, he stood up and found that he was very sore and very, *very* irritated.

He was just about to shout another insult back at the tauros when he realized that the one attack hadn't been enough to quench the tauros's outrage. He was already charging through the water that separated the two sandbars, preparing for another strike. Cody turned tail and fled down the length of the sandbar, fear now mixing with his anger. "I didn't take the scarf! Just leave me alone!" he shouted back at the tauros.

"Stand your ground and battle me, coward!" the tauros replied.

To Cody's infinite frustration, he found that - no matter how hard he tried - he absolutely could not keep running in a straight light. He

zagged back and forth across the width of the sandbar, never going quite in the direction he intended to.

Sure, I'm scatterbrained, but I think I should be able to run in a straight line! he practically shouted in his head. *Is it because I'm this stupid pokémon? This is so frustrating!*

Cody briefly looked back over his shoulder and saw that he was actually managing to increase the distance between himself and his pursuer; his light body allowed him to easily run atop the sand, while the tauros's heavy body and small hooves caused him to sink down with each step, slowing his pace considerably. Not to mention, the tauros was trying to follow his zagging path, yet could not change direction nearly so quickly as the zigzagoon who, true to his name, was practically made for this sort of motion.

Of course, Cody knew that any lead he had would be lost when he got to the water, where the tauros would be able to keep running and he would be forced to swim. For now, he managed to jump over a small gap to the next sandbar, allowing him to stay a safe distance away. But this sandbar was smaller, and it had no nearby isles to jump to. He would be forced to swim, or else stand his ground and battle.

God, what in the world did I do to deserve this?

He was already nearing the edge of the sandbar; he knew he had no other choice. He spun around and faced the threat, ready to jump aside like a bull fighter right before he could be headbutted or trampled or gored or whatever this insane pokémon was planning to do to him.

"Fine! You want to fight?" Cody challenged, his fur bristling and becoming seemingly more jagged than before. "Then let's go!"

The tauros's eyes seemed almost red with anger as it sped up even more, head still lowered as it charged toward the now motionless

zigzagoon. Cody braced himself but, right as he was about to jump out of the way, a new voice rang out:

"Not so fast, bully!"

Before tauros could react, a brown bird with long legs, a long neck, and no wings came barreling into him, easily knocking him into the water despite her smaller size.

A doduo… Maybe. Something seems off about her, Cody thought. *Where'd she come from? Well, I guess both the tauros and I were too focused on each other to see her coming… Lucky for me, it seems.*

The tauros bellowed in anger and quickly got to his feet, only to be knocked back into the water as some tiny pokémon jumped off the bird's back and punched the brute right between the horns.

"What the heck are you doing, Tauros?" the little one shouted at him from her perch on the top of his head. She was a very strange creature that reminded Cody very vaguely of a kangaroo; her body shape looked familiar, as if she were a pokémon he'd seen before, but he couldn't quite place the name of what species she was. "You're always causing problems, aren't you? Can't you cool your head for five minutes and actually leave everyone alone? Idiot."

The tauros stood up from the water, but he didn't immediately make any attempt to throw off his attacker. As things stood, Cody guessed that the tauros was in a vulnerable position. If that was the case, the tauros certainly wasn't happy about it; he snorted and said, "Shut it, pipsqueak. I don't need to hear any lectures from-"

"It's Kangaskhan to you!" the tiny pokémon said as she yet again punched him in the head, the force of the blow causing him to crumple to his knees. "And you better remember it this time! Sheesh, I knew you were stupid, but I thought you can at least remember my name."

Kangaskhan? Those are bigger, aren't they? Cody thought. *But I guess this pokémon looks like a baby kangaskhan… That must be it. The ones in the show always carried babies around, didn't they?*

"What do you have your tails in a tangle about today, anyway?" another pokémon said to the tauros. Cody hadn't noticed him before, but this new pokémon apparently been sitting on the doduo's back this entire time. He was a very fluffy sort of rodent thing with big ears and a notable explosion of fur covering his tail. He would have been absolutely adorable if not for the layer of dirt that seemed ingrained into every grey hair of his body, giving him an absolutely filthy appearance even by non-human standards.

The tauros shot an enraged glare towards Cody, who was still rather speechless at the sudden change in situation. "This stinking zigzagoon stole my favorite scarf! I couldn't let him get away with that! Now get off my head so I can finish him, Kangaskhan!"

The fluffy grey pokémon looked around him in an over-exaggerated way. "Scarf? I don't see any scarf around here, nonetheless with this zigzagoon."

"It's because he's lying!" Cody said, suddenly recovering his speech enough to vent his annoyance. "I found a scarf lying on the ground and picked it up! Then this idiot comes charging up to me claiming that I stole it! I gave it back to him, but he charged at me anyway!"

Tauros got to his feet and pawed at the water, but the doduo stepped between him and his target before he could try anything again. She looked nervously back and forth between the two pokémon, her head jerking almost erratically as she did so. "Now, um, that's enough," she said, anxiety apparent in her voice. "The guildmaster personally told you to stop making trouble, didn't he, Tauros?"

"Like that kid could do anything about it. And I don't need you to remind me of that weakling's threats, Do- *solo* ."

The pokémon on Tauros's head suddenly jumped up, did a forward somersault in midair, and brought her tail down hard on the grey stone embedded in the bull pokémon's head. A slight groan escaped Tauros's mouth before he collapsed to the ground, this time fully knocked out.

"And her name is Do- *duo*," the kangaskhan said as she stepped off of the tauros's head and onto the sandbar. "Get your brain out of your butt and get it right. Sheesh. Some pokémon…"

"Well, that's one way to take care of that trouble maker," the grey fluffy pokémon said, amused. Then he jumped off the doduo's back and walked up to Cody, smiling amiably. "I'm Minccino. Or Ryan. Whichever one you prefer. Nice to meetcha."

Though their bodies were more or less the same size, the minccino made Cody feel small. *I guess walking on two legs makes all the difference, doesn't it?* "I'm Cody. Thanks for all the help and all."

"Don't mention it," the baby kangaskhan said. "I take every opportunity I can get to beat that dumb tauros senseless."

"The kangaskhan's name is Lisa, by the way," Ryan added. "Just ignore her. She's always looking for a battle."

"At least I *can* battle, you overgrown fluffball," Lisa countered.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "If you call punching everything you see 'battling,' then yes, you battle."

The baby kangaskhan suddenly threw herself at the minccino, ramming into him with her head. Cody just barely managed to step back as the two devolved into a whirl of punches that rolled back and forth depending on who had the upper hand. Cody just watched them, dumbstruck.

"Don't mind them," the doduo said, her demeanor only somewhat less fidgety now that the conflict between Tauros and Cody was over.

"They do this at least once a day. But if you, uh, don't mind me asking… What's a zigzagoon like you doing here? I didn't even know that any lived in the area of Sprawling Shallows."

"I'm… looking for my family," Cody replied eventually. Which was true, in a sense. He really did want to figure out how to get home. It just wasn't the whole truth. Not by a long shot.

The doduo jerked her head up at a sudden splash behind her; as soon as she saw that it was just Ryan and Lisa finishing up their fight, she turned her head back to Cody. "Where do you live? We might be able to give you some directions, if you're lost."

Cody hesitated again, then lied, "My family is, um, traveling around right now. I got separated from them, so I'm not entirely sure where they might be. Do you know if there are any humans around here?"

The doduo blinked and cocked her head, obviously confused.

"Humans? You trying to pull our legs, you ungrateful twerp?" Lisa said as she and Ryan walked back into the conversation, both dripping wet. "Everyone knows those are just old hatchling stories. They don't actually exist."

Cody dropped his eyes to the ground, uncertainty and embarrassment washing over him. *No humans? None at all?*

"No, sorry, sorry," Cody apologized, though inwardly he felt annoyance growing. He couldn't help it if he didn't know what he was talking about; this brat of a kangaskhan could be a little nicer about it, he thought. "It's just… My family. They all believe that humans exist. That's why they're traveling around, to find proof of them." He looked up again to gauge Lisa's reaction, hoping that she'd believe his story. Judging by the soreness in his body, he knew that this wasn't a dream, in which case he needed the pokémon here to believe him.

Lisa gazed at him sternly for a few moments before suddenly smiling and putting her hands on her hips. "You know, kid, I like you! You're an absolutely nutty kleptomaniac. Exactly the sort of pokémon we've been looking for. Welcome to Team Misfits! And we're not taking no for an answer!"

Ryan and the doduo turned their heads to Lisa. "You sure?" Ryan asked. "Don't you think you're being a little-"

"Sure I'm sure!" Lisa said. "I've got a good feeling about this kid. Besides, he's a messed-up normal type, just like us. And he was facing down Tauros! That takes guts. We wouldn't be able to find anyone who would fit in better even if we tried! Isola, what do you think?"

The doduo turned he head back to Cody. "Well, do *you* want to be part of our team? I think that's the real question here," she said. "We're all members of the Eastern Guild. As Lisa said, we're Team Misfits. You do sort of seem to fit the theme of our team…"

As if that explains anything, Cody thought. *I haven't a clue what a guild or a team even is. At least not in the sense that they seem to be talking about them.* "I think I should pass… I really need to find my family. I appreciate the offer, though, but I guess I'll be off."

He turned to leave, only to find his tail firmly grasped in the kangaskhan's forepaw. "I said that we're not taking no for an answer. Cody, was it? Anyway, Cody, you're coming with us and joining our team. Either that, or we can haul you back for scarf-stealing. Which will it be?"

"Lisa, we can't do that," the doduo, Isola, said. "We all know that this all was Tauros's fault."

"The guildmaster doesn't know it, though, does he?" Lisa said. "So, Cody, how 'bout I sweeten the deal a bit. If you join the team, we'll look around a bit for your family or something. Okay? Okay. We're heading back to the guild now."

Cody managed to rip his tail out from Lisa's grasp. He turned to face the group, then slowly began backing up. "You're even more of a bully than that tauros," Cody said harshly, no longer in a very friendly mood. They may have saved him from the tauros, but he didn't appreciate being forced into anything, especially when he was so confused as to what all was going on in the first place. "Seriously, just leave me alone."

Ryan sighed in response to Cody's answer, and walked up close to Cody before he could make a dash for it. "You know, when Lisa gets like this, she literally won't take no for an answer," the minccino whispered in Cody's ear. "She'll probably beat you to a pulp until you literally can't refuse the offer. And neither Isola nor I is strong enough to stop her. Why don't you just give out team a try? I promise you can drop out of Team Misfits anytime you like, if it's not working out. And we really will help you find your family, if you're dead-set on that."

His first instinct was to run while he still had the chance. These pokémon seemed like absolute nutjobs, and he wanted no part in their "team" or whatever it was. But after a moment's thought, he physically slumped, letting his tail and ears droop downwards. As much as he hated to admit it, this was probably the best thing he could do right now. "All right, all right. I give in. I've got nowhere else to go, anyway."

"Great! Knew you'd come to your senses," Lisa said. "Hey, Isola, you can carry all three of us, right?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued, "Of course you can! Let's get back to the guild now. That's where we were headed when we stumbled across your predicament, Cody."

Isola lowered herself to the ground, and Cody (with some trepidation) got on her back, followed closely by Lisa and Ryan. Isola waited a moment until they were all adjusted, then she darted off, easily carrying her load of pokémon.

Cody wasn't particularly happy with the entire situation, but as they darted east with the flow of the current, he decided to make the best of it and try to figure some things out.

"So… Team Misfits? How'd you get that name?" he asked.

"It's not obvious?" Ryan asked.

Cody shook his head. "I really don't have a clue. Should it be obvious?"

Ryan flicked his ears with amusement. "Actually, yes. Not that any of us mind it anymore. We each have our own problems, you see. I was kicked out of my family's den when I was really young, because even a trubbish could beat me in a cleanliness contest. Most minccino are complete neat freaks, so my parents literally couldn't stand to have me around. And Lisa-"

"I can tell me own story. Sheesh," Lisa interrupted. "I had a twin, and since my mom could only fit one of us in her pouch, she chose to keep me out 'cuz she could tell from the get-go that I could take care of myself. Of course, she still watched out for me for a while, but in the end it just got frustrating for me, since she was holding me back. So I'm probably the only young kangaskhan you'll ever see out of her mother's pouch. And I'm darn proud of it, too. I don't need anybody to take care of me."

Cody turned his gaze to Isola, though her own eyes darted everywhere around her except back at her passengers. "And you… Isola, was it?" Cody asked. "How do you fit in with the team?"

"You really can't tell?" Ryan asked, perplexed. "Have you been living in a hole all your life?"

Cody's fur prickled with embarrassment. "Well, do excuse me for being stupid. If you're gonna make fun of me for it, maybe I should leave now."

"Make fun of you? No! Sorry if it sounded like that," Ryan said. "If there's one thing we don't do, it's make fun of pokémon. We're all too used to it ourselves to find it funny. I'm just surprised, is all. Isola, you wanna tell him about yourself?"

The bird momentarily glanced back at Ryan. "No, you can do it," she said without missing a step.

Ryan nodded. "Well, doduo like Isola always have two heads. As you can see, Isola only has one. Her flock ostracized her, and she was forced to leave."

"And she's all jumpy 'cuz she doesn't have another head to watch out for her," Lisa added. "That's why we watch her back instead. Guess that's even more important nowadays, what with pokémon like that tauros always going crazy over the smallest things."

"Can't really blame him, though," Ryan said. "Everyone's on edge. I mean, no one's been able to evolve for so long, the ice from the north is spreading southward, and the weather has gone absolutely bonkers. *And* natural disasters come and go as quickly as a dodrio's mood swings. You hear about that fire out west? I guess an entire forest burned down. A lot of pokémon died, and a lot more are now homeless. I bet the Western Guild really has its work cut out for it, trying to help all those pokémon out. It's kinda depressing, really."

Cody perked up towards the end of Ryan's list of misfortunes. "Speaking of guilds… What are they?"

Both Ryan and Lisa just stared at him for a few moments, and he dropped his gaze in shame. Obviously, he'd said something else stupid.

"They're the things that help pokémon out, of course," Lisa eventually explained. "Pokémon form rescue teams and join guilds to help out anyone who needs help. Duh. Really, you just drop out of the sky or something? 'Cuz there's no way you can live *anywhere* without knowing about the guilds."

"Yet again, sorry that I'm so stupid," he said in a hurt tone, not meeting Lisa's eyes. "I guess I just stuck with my family so much that I didn't really learn a lot. I just don't get along well with other people, is all." *Kinda hurts to admit it, but that much is actually true…*

Ryan's eyes narrowed. "People?"

Realizing he'd made a big slip, Cody tensed as he tried to pass it off. "People? Did I say that? Guess my family's so big into human myth that I start using that terminology."

"You're not telling us something," Ryan said suddenly, his voice unaccusatory but certain.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Cody stuttered, wondering if maybe he should bail off of Isola's back now, before he let more slip. What would these pokémon do if they found out he was human? Lock him up? Interrogate him? Hand him back over to that crazy tauros?

"You're lying about something, aren't you?" Ryan repeated, this time with a friendly smile on his face. "Hey, we're a team now! You can tell us anything. No need to hide it. Although if it's something you don't want to talk about, you don't have to."

"What do you mean, he doesn't have to?" Lisa asked. "Of course he does! Teammates don't keep secrets!"

Before Cody could answer, Isola quite suddenly came to a stop and turned her head to look at Lisa. "If he doesn't want to talk about it, then don't make him, Lisa," she said calmly, her eyes sad. "There are some things a pokémon doesn't want to talk about, even with the closest of friends. And *especially* not with friends who he just met and who just forced him to join their team."

She turned her head forward again and sped up again without another word; Lisa grumbled something about being lectured, but didn't argue.

Ryan more or less ignored the exchange and continued to look at Cody expectantly. "Really, if you have something to get off your chest, then tell us. Maybe we'll be able to help."

Cody sighed. *Well, they already think I'm sort of crazy… Might as well give it a shot. Otherwise I'm never going to figure out what's going on.*

"So?" Lisa asked. "You gonna tell us?"

Cody took a deep breath. "I'm actually a human. I don't know how I ended up as a zigzagoon, but I'm a human from a world that doesn't even have pokémon."

They all lurched forward as Isola stumbled, her surprise momentarily distracting her.

"What's the big idea?" Lisa asked, her surprise disappearing almost instantaneously and replacing itself with anger. "Trying to mess with us when we were all ready to hear you out… That's messed up. You've got one bad sense of humor, jerk."

"I'm not trying to mess with you!" Cody insisted. Now that he'd admitted to it, he desperately wanted to be believed. "It's true! I just woke up here on a sandbar and I don't have a clue how I got here or why I'm a pokémon!"

"You know, Lisa, I think he's telling the truth," Ryan said. "Or, at least, he thinks he is."

Lisa looked at Cody closely, and this time he met her eyes and held her gaze, determined to make her believe him. Slowly, a grin spread across her face, and eventually she said, "Well, all the better, I suppose. The way I see it, there are three possibilities here. You're either a compulsive sensational liar, crazy, or really a human. And all three of those possibilities make you a perfect match for Team Misfits! This is great!"

Swinging his fluffy tail back and forth thoughtfully, Ryan put in, "I'm going to have to go with compulsive liar on this one. No offense meant, Cody. You just don't seem like the crazy type, and I haven't believed in humans since even before I got kicked out of the den."

"Please let him be crazy," Lisa said, looking up to the sky. "Dear Reshiram and Zekrom above, please let him be crazy. That'd be excellent. I've always wanted to know a really nutty pokémon."

Frustrated, Cody shifted himself so that his head hung off the side of Isola's back. "Great. Just great," he mumbled. "I'm stuck with one pokémon who doesn't believe me, and another one that's completely crazy herself."

Ryan heard him and chuckled at his comment. "Isola, what about you? What do you think-"

"We're almost there," Isola said, cutting him off before he could finish the question.

Cody lifted his head, completely forgetting his frustration as his curiosity was roused. He saw that they were quickly approaching where the massive shallow river emptied into the ocean, but it wasn't the sight of the ocean that drew his attention. His eyes were glued to five giant columns of rough stone that jutted up from the mouth of the river. The middle one was so large that Cody imagined that even the biggest of pokémon would be able to fit inside it, and around that largest pillar four smaller ones stood, one in each of the cardinal directions (as best Cody could tell). Each of the smaller ones had a single passageway of rock connecting it horizontally to the central rock, and the two that stood to the north and south had additional passages of stone that stretched all the way down to the two sides of the river's mouth.

"That thing is *huge*," Cody said, unable to contain his amazement. There had been nothing like this at home, and aside from TV and photos, he'd never seen anything aside from the quilt of flat farmlands that was his home. "Is that the guild?"

"Yep!" Ryan said as Isola altered her course slightly so that her swift legs brought her and her passengers towards one of the branches of rock that slanted down to the ground at the mouth of the river. "And it's your home, so long as you're a member of our team. Like it?"

"How is this even possible?" Cody said, unashamed of his amazement. "I definitely didn't think rocks could do that!"

"They say that the founder of the guild, the great Terrakion, made it like that," Isola chimed in as she came to a stop at the end of the passage of rock, which up close turned out to be a hallway with walls lined with holes to let light in. She lowered herself to the ground to let off her three passengers. "The inside is even cooler, you know. Shall we go in?"

Cody didn't even answer. He simply charged ahead, up the slanted passage that was large enough to fit a creature even several times Isola's height.

"It's so weird to think that we're walking above water - it feels so solid," Cody commented as he jogged quickly onward. If any of his companions said anything in response, he didn't hear them; he was too caught up with getting his forepaws onto the ledge of a low window so that he could look out across the waves. "I've never been to the ocean before, either. It really is better to see it in person than in pictures, huh?"

Then he dropped his paws back to the ground and hurried towards the end of the passage, excited to see what the place itself was like if the hallways alone were this cool.

"Oi! Wait up, crazy Cody!" Lisa shouted at him as they climbed the slanted passage.

Cody didn't listen, so only Isola had managed to catch up by the time he finally reached the end of the hallway. The circular room he next entered was even taller than the hall he had just came through, and it was as wide as the whole column of rock itself. Square supports

dotted the room at regular intervals, making it so that - depending on which direction Cody looked - they created different, almost entrancing patterns. Light filtered in through the windows that lined the walls, further amplifying the effect of the angled patterns by contributing lines of shadows to the floor.

"Oh? Isola, who's your friend?"

Cody jumped in surprise at the voice that came from immediately to the right of him, and Isola literally squawked and practically fell to the ground in shock, stumbling over her two long legs. Both shocked pokémon turned to see a small, bipedal pokémon floating in the air immediately next to them. He had short legs, long arms, and a massive head with strange markings on its broad forehead. He had no mouth that Cody could see, and there were three colors of lights where its hands should have been.

As both Cody and Isola quickly recovered from their surprise, the lights on the pokémon's hands flashed and his voice rang through the air. "Whoops… Sorry. I keep on forgetting not to teleport right next to pokémon. Especially not you, Isola. My apologies. But my question still stands, doesn't it? Who's your friend?" The pokémon's bright green eyes were friendly and inquisitive.

"Don't apologize, Guildmaster. I'm fine," Isola said, though the constant motion of her legs and head as she glanced around nervously said otherwise. "This is Cody, and-"

"He's the newest member of Team Misfits!" Lisa finished as she entered the room, she and Ryan having finally finished the uphill climb. "And he's as crazy as a spoink without its pearl. Thinks he's a human. Funny, huh?"

Cody whipped around and glared at the baby kangaskhan, who was less than a forth of his total size. He was tempted to attack her then and there, but he knew she was stronger than she looked, so he settled for just being angry. "Lisa! You don't have to tell everyone you meet! Can't you keep your mouth shut?" With a sheepish smile,

Cody turned back to the little floating pokémon. "Sorry about that… I'm really not as crazy as she says."

The pokémon blinked, its lights flashing rapidly for a few seconds before dimming once again. "Well, regardless, welcome to the Eastern Guild," he said, his voice ringing through the air despite the fact that Cody could still see no mouth from which the sound could emerge. "I'm Elgyem, the guildmaster here. It's a pleasure to meet you. So are you actually a human, or aren't you?"

Cody looked off to the side, immediately sulky. "You think I'm crazy, too, don't you? Maybe I am, but-"

"Oh, no, quite the contrary," the guildmaster said, his eyes brightening. "If it's true, then I'd very much like to have a chat with you sometime. I had an interest in human lore some years ago, and I was wondering if perhaps you could clear some things up for me."

Cody brightened, but Lisa and Ryan both looked at Elgyem in shock. "You *believe* him?" Ryan asked incredulously. "No offense yet again, Cody, but… Guildmaster, you can't be serious."

"I'm quite serious, I assure you," Elgyem said. "I don't see how we'd have so many myths about them if they didn't exist. We simply-"

"Hey, Guildmaster! What are you doing, teleporting off like that?" a voice suddenly said from the other side of the room.

The whole group looked over to see a small yellow sphere of a pokémon entering the room from the opposite passageway. As the pokémon in question drew closer, Cody saw that she had a leafy blanket pulled tightly around her entire body, as if she was chilly on this beautiful day; only her face remained exposed, revealing a very annoyed expression.

In a dull, unamused voice, the new pokémon continued, "We've got work to do, but you always teleport away and leave me to it by myself. You think I'm going to keep on working while you're meeting

every new pokémon that comes to the guild? No way. So I had to climb all the way down that drafty hallway to come get you. Not. Cool."

"But Swadloon, I-"

"No buts, Elgyem," the pokémon interrupted . "Let's hurry back up and get that stupid work done. Not like the work around here is ever finished…"

The swadloon started to waddle back towards the other side of the room, not looking to see if Elgyem was coming.

The guildmaster briefly glanced back to Cody. "I suppose I must be going. I do look forward to talking with you more, though." Before Cody could respond, the little pokémon disappeared, only to reappear floating next to swadloon.

"That other pokémon is Deputy Swadloon," Ryan said as he stepped up to Cody's side and watched the duo go. "All of the guild members love her hopeless pessimism, but don't let her know - she wouldn't believe you, and it'd put her in a terrible mood. They're both actually really strong, despite their appearances. They didn't come to be the youngest guildmaster and deputy in the land for nothing."

Cody scowled as the two disappeared down the hallway at the opposite side of the room. "If you say so…"

"But true to appearances, Guildmaster Elgyem is just as gullible as he seemed," Lisa commented. "Sheesh. It'd make me embarrassed to be a part of this guild if he wasn't so darned likeable for it. And if he wasn't so strong, too. Anyway, Isola, why don't you and the new kid grab us something to eat! Ryan and I will head on down to-"

"Better yet, Lisa and I will grab some food!" Ryan said as he suddenly grabbed Lisa's paw and started dragging the smaller pokémon towards the path that Elgyem and Swadloon had left by.

"You're probably tired after a run-in with a tauros. We'll show you around later."

Lisa ripped her paw away from Ryan's. "What? Make the newbie get the food! I ain't goin' nowhere!"

"And this is why no one ever wants to join our team," Ryan replied as he grabbed her paw yet again and continued to drag her onward. "Come on - maybe if we're nice to this guy, he won't try to run away the first chance he gets."

"Oh, um, what should I do?" Isola called after Ryan and Lisa.

"Go ahead and show him to our room, of course!" Ryan said. "We'll be back in a bit!"

"Um, right! Will do!" Isola called back, though she bobbed her head up and down in apparent unease. "This way, Cody. Or do you just prefer Zigzagoon? I know we're not good friends or anything yet, so, um…"

Maybe she's creeped out about being alone with a nutjob like me… That'd explain the increased nervousness. "Cody is fine." He felt kind of sorry for her, actually, and so he tried to give her an encouraging smile despite the fact that, considering his situation, he was the one who probably needed the encouragement. "Anyway, where's this room of ours? I actually am kinda beat."

She started to lead the way towards one side of the room, which drew Cody's attention to the staircase that ascended alongside one section of the wall.

"The stairs spiral all the way through each of the towers," Isola explained, calming down a bit as they started down the stairs. "Our room is on the floor just below us, in this southernmost tower."

They walked down the stairs in silence, but when they reached the bottom, Isola stopped and turned to Cody. "Are you sure you're

okay? You already looked a bit beat up by the time we stumbled across you and Tauros… You haven't said anything about being injured, but…"

"I'm fine," Cody said, pitying the timid pokémon enough to be nice. "I've dealt with worse. I remember one time when I was caught in a blizzard and I had to deal with practically a whole herd of… Well, they're like tauros, I guess. Humans call 'em cattle. They all panicked while I was with them and started stampeding."

"Really?" Isola asked, her eyes widening. "What did you do?"

"Oh, well…"

Cody scowled as the memory came flooding back to him, more vivid than any he had tried to recall earlier.

The cows spooked at something in the blizzard… And they ran me down, didn't they? I got trampled… I was in a lot of pain. But I somehow was still alive. But the cold and the snow…

It was as if he no longer was inside the guild. All he felt was pain as he remembered calling out into the night for help, though the only response he got was the howling of the wind. He remembered trying to crawl through the snowdrifts, desperately moving toward the headlights of his truck. Then there was the whiteness slowly encasing him… And he felt himself becoming drowsier and drowsier, the pain drifting away until everything seemed one with the stark white cold that encased him.

"Cody? You okay?" Isola asked, concern apparent in her voice.

He shook his head. He wasn't okay. He couldn't possibly be okay. He knew that there was no way his parents would have thought to come look for him, at least not before it was too late. He remembered too well the sensation of his own life ebbing from him. And he could clearly recall that one moment of clarity, right at the end.

Okay? How could I be okay? he thought distantly, his thoughts more muddled than ever before. *No, I'm not okay. I'm definitely not okay…*

… *I'm dead.*

The shock of the revelation - as well as the memory of dying itself - was too much for Cody to bear. His consciousness slipped from him and he dropped to the ground in a dead faint.

So, while writing this… It literally felt like the worst thing I've written in ages, and that's including the 19-day brain vomit that my nanowrimo novel ended up being. So if it ended up as bad as I felt like it was, I apologize. I quite literally would have scrapped it and completely restarted on it (such is the level of my perception of the badness of this chapter), but I didn't have time to do that and still get it out on time. I settled for editing it twice… But it still ended up being ickily long and not as good as I would want it. Hopefully I'm just being paranoid, and it turned out at least somewhat okay.

I was also very, very sleepy when I wrote a lot of this chapter, so maybe I'm just associating my irritation at the sleepiness with this chapter as a whole.

Anyway, let's welcome the scatterbrained and slightly judgmental Cody to the scene, as well as his very dysfunctional team! ^_^ Despite my fears about the quality of this chapter, I hope you enjoyed seeing them all for the first time, and I assure you that even if this chapter *didn't* turn out well, I expect some very great, very funny chapters from them. If Team Rebirth can also be known as Team Angst, then Team Misfits might more appropriately go by the name of Team Shenanigans. :-D

Thanks for reading!

Max

Chapter Three: Max

"You know, this isn't too bad once you get used to it," Max murmured to himself, swishing his tail and flapping his wings experimentally. "But archen are extinct, aren't they? Except for those that scientists manage to revive, at least. And I'm a human… Aren't I? Hmm… If only this headache would go away, maybe I'd be able to figure things out…"

He twisted his neck and examined his body more closely. But he was just the same as when he'd woken up just a few minutes ago; it was all definitely there, and it was all definitively *not* human. He could feel where feathers stuck into his body, he could sense the ground beneath his taloned feet, and he was - annoyingly enough - unable to see anything directly in front of him, due to his giant red beak and the placement of his eyes. Funnily enough, that was the most unsettling part of waking up in a strange place with a strange body. Well, that and the headache, but that at least was slowly going away. Unlike the headache, his eyes weren't about to adjust themselves to the front of his face - erm, beak - anytime soon, as far as he could tell.

Max was fairly surprised at how calmly he was taking things. Sure, he knew he was a laid-back sort of person, but this was different than anything he'd even heard of in real life. He knew he ought to be freaking out, but somehow he just couldn't. In fact…

"I wonder if I can fly? How awesome would that be!" he said aloud, looking closely at the long blue flight feathers that budded from only half of his wings. "Archen were supposed to be mainly land-bound, but… Might as well give it a shot. Can't hurt."

Looking for a good place to test his skills or lack thereof, he truly examined his surroundings for the first time. He was standing on the

ground in a stunning forest filled with giant trees, which seemed all the larger due to his own small size. Some shafts of emerald light burst through the thick canopy to light the dim understory, for which Max was truly grateful; even with that little light, it was still a somewhat creepy, unusually silent place.

In truth, the creepiness might have come from the trees, which were quite unlike any that Max had seen before. The canopy was the only place where leaves grew. Aside from way up there, the trunks and branches were completely bare. Moreover, the branches didn't even *end.* The thick limbs of wood and bark simply extended and twisted through the air until they met up with another branch or trunk, at which point they fused together. It created a strange effect, almost like a three-dimensional spider web that could ensnare anyone who wandered into the forest.

For a tiny and confused human-turned-archen such as himself, it seemed a less than welcoming place.

Still, he tried not to let the atmosphere of the place bother him as his eyes locked onto one of the branches, a knotted slab of wood that was wider than he was long. It hung in the air just a couple feet above his head.

"Ah-ha! A perfect target for my first flight," he said, his tail weaving back and forth in anticipation. "Prepare yourself, branch, for I shall conquer you!"

Max hunkered down, his knees bending exactly the opposite way from what he was used to. Then he leapt into the air, pumping his wings as he launched towards the branch and easily reached his destination. More than reach it, in fact; his sharp claws had to scrabble for purchase as he nearly overshot the branch.

"Wow! Definitely couldn't jump that high as a human! Relatively speaking, at least," he said, amazed. Though with some disappointment, he realized that it really had been little more than a

great jump, not an actual flight. His wings had done next to nothing. His powerful legs had done all the work.

He sighed. "Guess I *am* more of a running pokémon than anything… Darn. But maybe I just need practice!"

Max locked onto another nearby branch and tried again, this time using a little less *umph* in his legs as he brought his wings down as powerfully as he could manage. Again he reached his intended landing point, only to realize that his wings still hadn't done much. They supplemented his jumping and gave him a little extra boost, nothing more.

Still, he wasn't one to give up so easily. *Especially* when something as cool as flying was at stake. His determination was also somewhat motivated by the fact that he was confused, he had nowhere to go, and he had a headache. All of those factors combined made him very lazy and less than willing to want to confront the real issue at hand. So for a time, he let himself enjoy his new archen body as he frantically flapped and hopped and ran through the branches which, the more he got used to them, the more he liked them for how easily they allowed for movement off of the ground. They were big enough to walk on and close enough together to move from one to another. Absolutely perfect for an archen such as himself.

Under other circumstances, he might have enjoyed himself all day, just trying to figure out how he could possibly force his stubby wings to gift him with flight. As it was, though, he could only ignore his problems for so long.

When his wings finally became sore from all the exertion, he took a break and sprawled out at the base of one of the branches at the point where it joined with the upright tree that it had either originated from or melded with. The sun had passed its zenith by then, making the forest somewhat darker than before.

"At least the headache went away," he said in an undertone, pleased to hear his own voice yet again. His wasn't the only voice he'd heard

today, though; he'd seen and heard other pokémon as he traveled through the forest via the branches. Like him, they had been able to talk; but other than a friendly return of a shouted out hello, Max didn't speak to them. Turning into a pokémon was one thing; hearing a bunch of different pokémon talk was nearly as surprising, at least for Max, and he was afraid that he'd make a fool of himself if he tried speaking to them for long. "But how did I get here in the first place? And why am I a pokémon?"

For the first time, Max tried to remember back to his human life, searching for anything that could help him answer the mystery. Only one memory came to mind. In his mind's eye, he felt a building shaking, he heard people screaming, and he saw smoke billowing as flames licked upward… He was swept away by a panicked crowd. He knew he needed to go back. He needed to fight the crowd and go back to where he had been. He had to. But…

No! he shouted in his head as he squeezed his eyes shut, stopping the memory before it could go any farther. His headache had returned suddenly, more forcefully than ever. *No! Why? There's only one thing that I've ever wanted to forget, only one thing that I've tried to forget for years! Why is that the only thing I can remember? No! I can't think about it. I won't! No no no no-*

"No!"

Max jerked upright at the sound. That last no hadn't been a thought, nor had it been his voice; it had sounded like a little girl. And she had sounded scared. He listened carefully and, in another moment, the voice came again:

"No! Leave my momma alone, you meanies!"

"Sweetie, get away!" another female voice shouted. "Momma will handle this!"

Yet another voice - this one lower and more threatening - said, "Maybe you'll get the picture if we attack your little girl instead…

hehe."

By the time the little girl's frightened scream rang out in response, Max was already on his feet and racing through the branches, using his newfound ability for jumping and running to his advantage. He found himself moving more quickly than he ever had as a human as he darted through the branches, becoming nothing more then a blur of brightly colored feathers and scales.

In no time, he found himself at the scene he had heard, and he took in the situation in as quickly as he could. There was a bellossom lying at the base of a tree, fairly badly injured but still conscious; a little ways a way, a young oddish was being chased by two very irritated beedrill. As Max watched, he saw the little oddish stumble and fall, tumbling face-first to the ground. The beedrill were still coming full speed, though. There was no way the oddish would get up in time to avoid the beedrill's lance-like appendages, that much was clear.

Max didn't even think before opening his beak and shouting, "Oi, bug-brains! Leave that oddish alone!"

The two beedrill wheeled in midair and looked around for a moment before finally glancing upward and spying Max at his perch in the branches. "You got a problem, pipsqueak?" one of the beedrill challenged. "We're just settling our debts. Stay out of our business, or you'll be messing with the business ends of stingers? Ya' hear?"

Max's heart beat faster as righteous anger flared up inside him. "Yeah, I hear you loud and clear, and all I'm hearing is that you're a pair of bullies!" Max shouted. "No matter what these two owe you, there's no reason you should take your anger out on anyone, much less a kid!"

The kid in question was crying now, tears streaming down her scared face as she tried unsuccessfully to hold back her sobs.

"Shut it!" the other beedrill shouted down at the oddish before turning back to Max and saying, "Oh yeah? Want us to take our anger out on you instead?"

"Just try me, you overgrown weedle!" Max shouted back, too late realizing that the only skills he currently had as a pokémon were running and jumping. That wouldn't be nearly enough to fight off two beedrill.

"With pleasure!" the beedrill shouted in unison as they zoomed upwards, darting through the web of branches towards their new target.

All Max's courage quite suddenly left him. "Shoot!" he said as he spun and fled, running as fast as he could down the branch he was on. *What was I thinking? I can't take on two beedrill! They're gonna slaughter me!*

Fear lent him speed, though, and at first he outpaced the beedrill despite the fact that he, unlike them, was limited to traveling only where there were branches to support him. He flapped his wings as he went, trying to boost his speed even further.

But he quickly began to flag. The beedrill noticed and sped up as they taunted, "What? Bird had his wings clipped? Too bad, you coward! You're gonna wish you never laid eyes on the beedrill brothers!"

"Um, can't we just talk this out?" Max gasped as he continued to run, desperate to try to save himself.

"As if!" the two beedrill shouted back.

Their voices came from right behind him this time and, all of a sudden, Max felt the spike of one of the bugs' stingers stick him in the back, breaking through the feathers and skin right next to his wing. He squawked in pain as the blow knocked him off of his current branch; he only barely managed to open his wings in time to

land on a branch below him. A second or two slower, and the crash might have been enough to knock him out right there and then.

"Nice poison jab, brother!" one of the beedrill said.

The other buzzed happily. "It was nothin'. Now let's finish off that bird off once and for all!"

Max was already on his feet and running again, his fear washing away any pain as he pushed himself harder than ever. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a tree with a hollow in its trunk, just big enough that he thought he'd be able to squeeze in. There were no good branches to get to it, but Max didn't have time to weigh his options. The beedrill would catch him again any second, and then it would be all over. In his desperation, he jumped off of his branch, propelling himself as far horizontally as he could in order to reach the somewhat distant trunk. He pumped his wings frantically and, by some miracle, managed to crash into the hollow space, bruising himself up badly in the process.

But that didn't matter. He was alive.

For the moment.

Suddenly, one of the stingers of the beedrill plunged itself through the opening, grazing one of Max's wings. He cried out in pain and stuffed himself as far away as he could manage from the opening.

"Come on out, you little featherhead!"

"We ain't gonna kill you or nothin'. Just rough you up a bit for acting like a tough guy. You can either come out now and face our poison jabs or stay in there as we start firing off pin missiles. Pick your poison!"

The other beedrill chuckled. "Good one, brother. Pick your poison… hehe."

Max's little body heaved as he tried to catch his breath, though his heart kept racing. He was trapped, and there was nothing he could do.

No no no no no! I need to run! Let me out of here! He looked around his hollow desperately, but there was no escape route other than the way he had come in.

"We'll give you another minute, kid, and then you're dead!" one of the beedrill called.

I'm a pokémon, right? Maybe I can… no. There's no way I can take those guys on, even if I knew how to actually do an attack! I have to run! I have to get out of here, now! If I can just work up the courage to burst out, maybe I'll be able to put some distance between them and me before they realize what's happened!

He scrunched his eyes shut and desperately tried to work up that courage.

"Ten seconds!" one of the beedrill shouted.

Come on, just move!

"Nine!" the other beedrill said, taking his turn to call out the number.

I just have to run out! It's not that hard!

"Eight!"

The archen took a timid step forward, his eyes still closed.

"Seven!"

He stepped back again, ashamed of himself and afraid for his life.

"Six!"

It's just like that time! I'm too much of a fraidy-meowth to save anyone, even myself!

"Seven!"

His heart pounded harder than ever, and his wounds throbbed.

"Six!" The beedrill were counting together now, speeding up impatiently with each passing number.

If only I could… I only…

"Five!"

I just have to be brave!

"Four!"

He tensed, preparing to attack. Still, he kept his eyes closed.

"Three!"

He stayed tense but frozen, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Two!"

I too afraid to even look at my opponent! I'm such a failure!

"One!"

Fear surged within him as every nerve in his body cried out for him to do something, *anything*, to avoid what was about to happen.

"Zero! Time's up, you little-"

Max wasn't quite sure what happened next. He felt a power rise up inside him, fueled by his desperation. It was a power that started in his bones and seemed to radiate out to every bit of his body, and it carried with it a feeling of age and strength. He felt it burst forward

out of him right when the beedrill was cut off, and he heard both beedrill cry out momentarily in surprise. In another moment, he heard two thumps come from the ground below him.

Only then did he open his eyes and peek out of the hollow to see the two beedrill lying on the ground many feet below him, both completely knocked out.

"Wow mister! You took out both of them with one attack! That's amazing!"

Max shifted his gaze to see the oddish running up towards the base of the tree, with her mother following right behind.

"Oh, um, really, it was nothing," Max said as he perched in the entrance to his hollow, his voice trembling nearly as much as his body. He forced himself to calm down as much as possible before jumping down to the ground, flapping his wings to slow and guide his descent. When he landed near the oddish and the bellossom, he added, "I don't even know how I did it."

The bellossom smiled. "Whether you knew how to do it or not, that was quite the ancientpower attack. I can't thank you enough for saving both me and my child."

"Really, it was nothing," Max repeated. He didn't want to be seen as a hero. He didn't deserve it. He would never deserve it. Even if things had turned out okay in the end, all he'd done was jump into something without thinking, then run from responsibility at the first opportunity. "Are you doing all right, Ma'am?" Max asked, trying to divert attention from himself. "You looked pretty beat up earlier, if you don't mind me saying."

The bellossom nodded. "A little synthesis and I was as good as new… Though I can't say the same about you. Looks like you've been hurt trying to help us. I can't apologize enough."

"No, no, don't apologize!" Max said. "I didn't do much, but I was glad to help!"

"Are you from the guild, Mister Archen?" the oddish suddenly spoke up. "Guild members are the only pokémon I know who stand up to pokémon like beedrill! And you're more powerful than all the guildmembers I've met!"

The archen tilted his feathered head, confused. "Guild? Sorry, but… I'm new around here. Very new. What's a guild?"

"It's a place where the most awesome pokémon ever all come together to beat up bad pokémon!" the oddish said, the leaves of her head perking up with enthusiasm. "I'm gonna join up one day so that I can help 'em, too!"

For some reason, the idea of this guild immediately appealed to Max. *I guess I always have liked big groups,* Max thought to himself. *And if they go around helping pokémon like I just did, then maybe they can help me become less of a coward. Maybe… Maybe that's why* that *day is the only one I can remember. Maybe that's why I ended up here, as a pokémon. Maybe I'm supposed to join this guild so that I can finally make up for that dreadful day.*

"Can just anyone join this guild?" Max asked, directing the question to the bellossom. He noticed suddenly that he was still trembling and that his wounds were pounding more than ever, but he tried to ignore that as he continued, "I mean, I sort of don't have a place to go to, and it sounds like the sort of thing I'd like to be a part of."

"Anyone can join," the bellossom affirmed. "And I think you'd be perfect for it, Archen, what with the way you jumped in without hesitation to help the two of us."

Max tried to deny the compliment, but the bellossom had already turned to her daughter. "Sweetie, why don't you show Archen to the guild? It looks like he'll need some treatment anyway, regardless of whether he chooses to stay there or not."

"Oh? And what are you going to do?" Max asked.

"I'll stay here with the beedrill," the bellossom said.

"But-"

"They're nice pokémon, usually," Bellossom said. "And they'll be more reasonable when they wake up. They were nice enough to let us have some berries earlier in the year, when the berry trees weren't growing well in our part of Woven Forest. But the weather's been so chilly lately that no berries are growing anywhere, so the beedrill got understandably desperate. They have a whole clan of younger weedle and kakuna to look after, you know. And then there was that fire off in Emerald Forest… I think that scared everyone in the land, especially us forest-dwellers. With stuff like that happening all the time, they probably just panicked."

Max scowled a bit. "They didn't look all that panicked to me…" he muttered.

Bellossom laughed. "They like to battle just as much as any pokémon, I suppose. Anyway, those wounds really are looking bad; I really must insist you make your way to the guild right away. Sweetie?"

"I'm on it, momma!" the oddish said. "Just follow me, Mister Archen!"

Archen glanced back at his wounds momentarily; both the graze on his wing and the deeper jab at his back were still seeping blood, making his feathers all sticky. Getting treatment sooner rather than later was probably a good call, so he started off after the oddish. "It was nice to meet you, Bellossom!" he shouted back as he left, hoping that 'Bellossom' was the right way to address her. "I hope the beedrill are a bit more sympathetic this time around!"

Bellossom simply waved him on, so he turned his attention back to following the oddish. He quickly found that his head was pounding

again and his body was still shaking. He guessed this was probably due to the pain.

If this is what pokémon have to go through every time they battle, I'm glad I never put them through it, he said, fairly certain that he had never been a trainer as a human, though he couldn't remember for sure.

"So where do you come from, Mister Archen?" the oddish asked, snapping Max out of his reverie.

"Um… A long way away."

"A long way away?" the oddish asked excitedly. "Then you probably know different stories than my mother! Can you tell me one of them? I love stories."

The little oddish looked so happy at the prospect of the story that Max felt bad that he couldn't oblige. "I don't remember any stories. Sorry."

"Oh," the oddish said before quickly brightening back up. "Then I'll tell you the stories that my mommy told me, okay?"

Max's ears were ringing now in addition to all his other aches and pains, but he ignored it as best he could. "Go for it."

"Okay, um, there's always Reshiram and Zekrom!" Oddish said. "I guess it's not much of a story… But everyone says that they fly above the land all the time, keeping the Spirit of the land in balance. And they're super cool and super strong, too! But no one has seen them in a long time, so I don't think they really exist. But it'd be cool if they did, right?"

"Yeah, definitely," Max replied, surprised to find that he was familiar with these two pokémon. He couldn't remember specifics, but he knew that they were mythical beings in the world where he came from.

The oddish's leaves drooped slightly as she continued moving forward. "Guess that wasn't very good for a story… I know! There's the story of Thundurus, Tornadus, and Landorus! The three of them were said to fly around the land and keep the weather in check, and warn pokémon if there was a storm or something that they couldn't manage to hold back. But one day, they disappeared, and everyone panicked because it was like the whole world went out of control! So you know what happened?"

"What?" Max asked distantly, only half paying attention. His vision was starting to black out at the edges, and he found that his thoughts were becoming muddled. *Have I lost too much blood or something? The wounds didn't seem this bad…*

Ignorant of Max's problem, Oddish continued, "The Four Warriors of Justice came, of course! They started helping pokémon and eventually, they founded the guilds. The one that we're going to is the Southern Guild, founded by Virizion. I guess the Four Warriors disappeared a while back, but their guilds are still there and going strong while helping pokémon. In fact, looks like we're here!"

They emerged from the forest to find themselves quite suddenly on a vast flat plain, its surface dotted with roots that ranged from small half-buried ones to others that were wider than Max's wingspan and that twisted out of the ground into fantastic shapes. At the center of this knotted plain, four trees stood at four points of an imaginary square. Though they weren't all that much taller than the gigantic trees Max had woken up among, they were easily three times thicker than even the thickest tree he had seen in Woven Forest. Unlike the trees of Woven Forest, these ones had no branches whatsoever except at the very top, where leaves suddenly flared out like the hair on a bouffalant's head. It was there at the very top that the four trees connected via their voluminous canopies, seemingly interweaving in a way that was not at all unlike the lower branches of Woven Forest.

Max stood there in a daze, admiring it for a long time not because of the awe it inspired in him, but because he felt about ready to pass out.

"Um, Mister Archen? Are you okay?" the oddish asked, finally realizing that something was wrong.

Max tried to answer in the affirmative, but only a mumble came out of his beak before his vision went completely black, his ears rang loudly enough to tune out an exploud, and his now unconscious body fell to the ground.

"Hey, Rose, looks like he's waking up!"

Max forced his eyes open to see the pokémon that had just spoken, a luxio. The electric-type grinned as soon as he saw that Max was looking at him and said, "Do you know that you walked all the way here from Woven Forest while you were both wounded and poisoned? That takes strength, kid."

"Oh, shoo for a moment, won't you Luxio?" the audino said as she roughly pushed him aside. With a mischievous smile, she added, "It's obvious that you're besotted with him, but the poor dear needs some space."

"Rose, be serious!" Luxio said, his hackles rising defensively, though he had a slight grin on his own face; though he'd been the butt of the joke, he obviously still found it amusing. "I just want to be the first pokémon to speak to the archen who came out of nowhere and completely knocked out two beedrill with one attack. That's someone to admire, if I'm any judge of it."

"Oh, no, you have it all wrong!" Max protested as he sat up from his little bed of leaves and found that, though his body was not entirely free of aches and pains, at least the headache and tunnel-vision and ear-ringing was gone. "I didn't-"

"Look what you've done now, Luxio!" Rose said, the antennae-like feelers on her audino ears tensing angrily. "Getting my patient all riled up right when he wakes up! Now, dearie, do sit back and relax," she said to Max. "I've treated the poison, and your wounds are

already starting to heal, but you still ought to take it easy for a bit. I'm Rose, and I treat pokémon here at the Southern Guild. Are you feeling better?"

Max smiled, or at least tried to; his beak made that a little bit difficult to do. "Yeah, I'm feeling much better. Thanks. But, um… Did I pass out right before I got here or something?" He couldn't quite remember for sure.

"Yes indeed," she confirmed. "That oddish friend of yours ran in to get us, and we managed to help you in. She's already gone back home, but she told us everything that happened before she had to leave."

"She sure did tell us everything!" the luxio said, forcing his way right next to Rose. "Quite impressive, as I said before! Beating two beedrill single-pawed is no easy feat. I'm Luxio, by the way, a solo guild member here with a passion for exploring."

"I'm, uh, Archen," Max said, since this seemed to be the proper way to introduce himself. "But you can call me Max. I've never really gone by anything else. And I was hoping to join the guild here. You know who I need to talk to?"

Luxio flicked his tail happily. "Of course I do! You'll want to talk to the Guildmasters. Just follow me and I'll take you to 'em!"

Max looked to the audino, feeling like he probably needed her permission to leave this infirmary. "Can I leave?"

"Depends. Are you feeling fine?"

"Yes, other than some hurting where I was injured, which is to be expected," he said, looking at the hole in his back which was, to his amazement, already beginning to close up. *Guess I've got a pokémon's knack for recovery along with my pokémon body.*

"In that case, you're free to go!" Rose said, a bright smile on her face as her blue eyes glistened happily. "Just remember to take it easy!"

"All right then, Mr. Hero-of-the-Day," Luxio said as he walked towards the door. "We're off!"

Max followed Luxio, but didn't let the hero comment go without protest. "Really, I'm no hero. I don't even-"

"Don't be so modest! Facts are facts, and that oddish didn't seem like a liar. You beat two beedrill with one ancientpower attack, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but-"

"And you stepped in to help that oddish and her mother when they were both being attacked, even though it had nothing to do with you. Didn't you?"

"Yeah, but-"

"But nothin'!" the luxio insisted, his fur sparking happily as he led the way up a staircase that was carved out of wood, just like every hall, floor, and ceiling that Max had seen so far. "That takes power and skill. I may not specialize in battling like a lot of the teams here, but I can appreciate a natural battler when I see him. It's a pleasure to know you."

Max ran up alongside Luxio. "Really, don't get the wrong idea! I'm just a coward. I just ran away from the beedrill until I was trapped. I don't even know how I used ancientpower."

Luxio looked at him closely for a few moments. "I still think you're just being modest," he said. "Even if that's true, you stepped in to help those two. That's a hero if I've ever heard of one. Anyway, no more arguing! I wanna be able to say that I was the first to meet Max the beedrill-battler, and you're going to ruin it if you keep on denying what everyone clearly sees is true."

Max looked down to the ground, his tail dragging behind him. "But it's not true…" he mumbled, lowly enough that Luxio couldn't hear him this time. He wasn't a hero. He hadn't been, not since *that* day, the only day he could remember from being human. Letting himself be called a hero just seemed like a mockery of what had happened back then, and it made him feel guiltier than ever.

"Anyway, Max, we're here! Guildmaster Mandibuzz, Guildmaster Braviary! I brought that archen with me."

Max looked around and saw that, unlike the stairs and halls and rooms he had just passed through, the room that he had just entered was a massive gathering space with a floor made entirely of tightly-woven but still living branches. Instead of a solid wood ceiling, branches arched above Max from four different trees at the corners of the room, each branch covered with leaves that were bigger than Max himself. Though this created a very solid barrier between the room and the outside for the most part, the branches were tied back at certain places to allow streams of light to filter in.

In the center of the room were two pokémon that Max was familiar with. There was a brightly-colored bird with his feathers all fluffed out to make himself appear larger; he stood taller than Max himself had as a human. No doubt about it - this was a braviary, one of the strongest and rarest pokémon to fly the skies. Next to him was a mandibuzz, one of the most ominous pokémon that Max knew of; she was equally large, with darkly colored feathers, a bald head, and bones decorating her waist and the crown of her head.

"So you're the kid that fought off two beedrill with one attack, huh?" the Braviary said, his manner of speaking making him seem rough and uncouth, though not necessarily unkind. "I like that! That oddish said that you were hoping to join the guild, right?"

"Um, yes… Guildmaster," he said, yet again hoping that he was using the right term of address. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, that is."

"Trouble? Hardly!" the braviary practically shouted, breaking into a hearty chuckle. "We're glad to have a fighter like yerself. Right Dear?"

The Mandibuzz smiled at Max graciously. "Even if you weren't a great fighter, you'd still be more than welcome to join. Are you feeling better, by the way? Rose said that she thought you'd been poisoned."

"Um, yes. I'm fine now," Max said, slightly stunned. Mandibuzz were supposed to be vicious, and braviary were majestic. Instead, this mandibuzz seemed kind and motherly, whereas the braviary was more obnoxious than anything. *Guess I can't judge a book by its cover here, huh? Then again, I guess that makes sense; after all, judging me as I look, I doubt anyone could guess I'm not actually a pokémon.*

"That's great to hear," said the mandibuzz. "My mate and I are the guildmasters here. It's wonderful to meet you. We really need to leave, or else I'd show you around, Archen. Luxio, would you mind doing the honors?"

The luxio stood a bit taller. "Of course, Guildmaster."

"Glad to hear it. Well, we'd best be off then, right Gale?" Mandibuzz said to her mate.

"Of course, of course, Truvel dear," the braviary said just before opening his wings and taking off, flying up through the high room before vanishing out one of the holes in the ceiling. The mandibuzz took off right after him and followed him out of the room.

Max watched them go, a look of longing on his face. "Wish I could fly like that…" he said, jealous of how easily they cupped the air beneath their wings.

"Huh? Aren't you…" Luxio looked at Max, then corrected what he had been about to say. "Well, guess it would be hard to fly with dinky

wings like that. But look on the bright side! When those two hatched, they would've been a vullaby and a rufflet, neither of which can really fly. But you can evolve just like they did, right? Once you're an archeops, no doubt you'll soar just like they do!"

Max brightened considerably. "I never thought of it like that."

"Of course, no one in the entire region has evolved in years, so we'll have to figure out what's wrong with that before you can ever fly," Luxio added.

The feather's on Max's body drooped. "Thanks for getting my hopes up and then crushing them." *No evolution? Like an everstone or something? That's the only thing I can think of that can stop evolution.*

"Hey, don't let it get you down, bro!" Luxio said. "You'll fly someday. Just hold on to that dream!"

Dream? That's not my dream… I have more important things to focus on. Whether or not it's the reason I'm here as a pokémon, I need to make up for that day. I'll make that my reason for being here. My penance. I was never able to make up for it as a human… Maybe this is my chance.

"Oi, Max! What you doin' standin' around? Get your head out of the clouds! We got a guild to see and pokémon to meet!"

Max looked over to the luxio and grinned as much as his beak could manage.

But even if I'm making up for the past… I don't see why I can't make some friends in the present.

Can anyone think of four fun names for pokémon identical quadruplets? So far, all I can think of is Fee, Fi, Fo, and Fum. Which

is actually pretty good, but I'd like to see if anyone can come up with something better. ^_^

Anyway, let's welcome the cowardly and as-of-yet teamless human-turned-archen, Max! He has only one memory of his human life, which for now will stay a secret… hehehe. After this chapter, the loop of characters will begin again with Vulpix, and that is *roughly* how the structure of this fic will stay throughout the story, though there shall be very notable exceptions later on.

Reminder - I am still drawing pictures for each chapter, even if they're not all that great! The links can be found on my profile. I also have a map of this PMD region there, which you're more than welcome to look at if you like having that sort of visual.

Also, I think I'll be putting up very small descriptions of all minor and major characters under the PMD:DoW section of my profile. I'm hoping that things won't get too confusing, but since this is my first time switching between so many characters, I worry that you might forget some pokémon in the shuffle. If this does happen, let me know. Or if I'm doing a good job of avoiding it, also let me know.

Hope you're liking it! If you've got a moment, please review to tell me what you think so far!

Team Rebirth

Chapter Four: Team Rebirth

Vulpix concentrated and instantly found her power, that little pocket of energy that she imagined to be a coal that constantly smoldered within her. Except now that she focused on it, it wasn't just a smoldering coal; she coaxed it to life, rapidly building on its heat until it exploded into a raging fire that longed for escape. Vulpix obliged that longing. Taking aim, she opened her mouth and blew, forcing out a dazzling salvo of bright embers that shone all the brighter as they hit their stone target.

She kept up the volley for as long as she could, but her small lungs quickly ran out of air. But she was satisfied with her work and had no need to push herself; she cut off the attack and let the fire inside her die down until she might need it again.

"Wow, great work!" Bulbasaur said, running up to her from the side of the room with a big grin on his face. "For someone without any knowledge of battling, you're certainly doing great for just two weeks of practice. I don't think I've ever seen an ember attack that strong. And your accuracy is amazing! Practically every ember hit the target. I've been practicing for a long time, but my razor leaf isn't nearly that accurate yet."

Vulpix smiled back, though she quickly let it fade. Concentrated on her attack though she may have been, she'd seen how Bulbasaur had flinched back when she'd begun. Bulbasaur had been so supportive during the past week or two as he helped her learn how to battle, but Vulpix wondered if he could really be happy working with a fire-type such as herself.

"Hmm? Something wrong?" Bulbasaur asked, seeing Vulpix's smile disappear.

She shook her head. "No, it's nothing," she said quietly.

"Well then, let's head back to the main gathering space and see if there are any good missions to take," Bulbasaur suggested, his optimism returning in full.

Seeing him smile like that, Vulpix couldn't help but let her own smile return as she followed him back through the underground passages, heading towards the massive room that served as the Western Guild's center.

Just before they could enter the room, though, Bulbasaur turned his head and looked back at Vulpix. "What's that you were humming just then?"

Vulpix woke from her thoughts. "I was humming?" she asked.

"Yeah, you were," Bulbasaur said. "Did you remember it from before the amnesia? I've never heard it around here, so I don't see how else you'd know it… Unless you were just making it up."

"I don't know," Vulpix said, frowning. "I can't even remember it now. What did it sound like?"

"It was kinda slow and mysterious… Not really sad, but not happy, either," Bulbasaur replied, trying hard to remember the tune. "I wasn't really paying that much attention to it, until I realized that I hadn't heard it. I liked it."

Vulpix smiled slightly. "Guess I'll have to try and remember it next time, then."

"Yeah, that'd be-"

"Hey, Team Rebirth!" another voice suddenly called out, interrupting their conversation.

Bulbasaur and Vulpix had just entered the guild's main room, and they both turned as a small yellow pokémon suddenly appeared next

to them, sitting on the ground with her eyes closed. Neither were surprised; they'd quickly gotten used to Fi the abra and her tendency to teleport around the guild.

"Hey Fi," Bulbasaur said cheerfully. "How's it going? What's up with the other guilds right now?"

"Oh, same as always, I suppose," Fi said. "The East and South guilds both got new members, just like you two. I guess the guy at the south is some sort of super-strong hero… But I think that's just my sister Fum over exaggerating things. I bet he doesn't have anything on you two prodigies."

Bulbasaur blushed but seemed proud of the compliment; Vulpix, on the other hand, shrunk a little behind Bulbasaur. She still hadn't gotten over the fact that she had no idea how she should act around others, even though she'd more or less adjusted to life as a guild member. Bulbasaur was the only one she really dared talk to. Around everyone else, she remained steadfastly speechless.

"You flatter us too much, Fi!" Bulbasaur said with a laugh. "And how 'bout the North? They doing well?"

Fi shook her head. "It's getting colder by the day. A lot of members left because they literally couldn't stand it. I guess even Fee couldn't take it, so she's staying down at the Eastern Guild for a while."

"I still think it's amazing that you four abra can communicate, even though you're so far apart," Bulbasaur commented.

The abra tapped her head knowingly, though in all other respects she seemed to be dozing where she sat. "Twin telepathy. Or, rather, quadruplet telepathy. It *is* pretty awesome, I guess. Oh, but anyway! I didn't just call you over to chat! Deputy Zebstrika left for a mission earlier today, but he said that he wanted you two to team up with Charmeleon and go after the mystery battler that's been causing a rucus around here lately. They say he's been sighted at Tallgrass Plains, just a little ways east of here."

"We have to team up with *Charmeleon* ?" Bulbasaur said incredulously. "That bully who's always trying to pick on Vulpix?"

Vulpix suddenly let out a yelp of pain as something stepped on one of her tails; they all turned to see the pokémon in question standing there, a malicious grin on his reptilian face.

"What did you say about me, twerp?" the charmeleon asked, the fire on his tail flaring up slightly.

Vulpix now had her teeth gritted together in obvious pain; the much larger pokémon still had one of her tails beneath his foot.

"Get off of her tail, flame-brain!" Bulbasaur said, his voice loud.

Charmeleon's grin widened as he took his time lowering his gaze to his feet. "Oh, that was your tail? Felt as rough as more stone to me," he said before finally lifting his foot. Vulpix hurriedly withdrew the afflicted tail, not relishing how sore it now was. "Anyway, I'm supposed to team up with you two rookies. Try not to slow me down or anything."

Fi suddenly spoke up; though her eyes were still closed, angry irritation seemed to roll off of her body in waves. "Charmeleon, you know as well as I do that Zebstrika teamed them up with you because he thinks they're strong enough for the task. Even *you* ought to be able to appreciate how impressive their battling skills are, especially since neither of them are all that old or experienced."

"Tch. Yeah, right," Charmeleon said condescendingly. "You can keep telling yourself that. Fact of the matter is, they wouldn't be able to handle the mission themselves. They say that this mystery pokémon knocks out his targets before they even know he's there… He's that vicious. He's even killed a couple pokémon, by the looks of it, though it seems as if that was just a side-effect; they say all he cares about is battling until the opponent is utterly defeated. That's why Zebstrika wants me along - so that I can take care of him. Anyway, as I said

before, don't get in my way, squirts. I'll be waiting out front. You'd better hurry and get ready, or I'll leave you behind."

The charmeleon turned, making sure that his tail hit Vulpix square in the face before walking away and heading out the guild's main entrance.

Vulpix rubbed her sore nose with a paw as she watched Charmeleon go, not wanting to take her eyes off of him until he was long gone.

Bulbasaur sighed. "And today started out so well…"

"Hey, shut up already!" Charmeleon suddenly said in an angry undertone, wheeling around to face Vulpix.

Vulpix quailed a little, her ears pinned back as she lowered her head. "What?" she asked quietly, not knowing what he was so angry about.

"The humming!" he said, his tail flame burning more brightly than ever, illuminating the grass that grew well above even his own head. The fire cast strange shadows on their surroundings as the grass waved in the wind. "Just cut it out with the humming, you little idiot! You want that pokémon to find us before we find him? You saw that pokémon we found earlier; it's a miracle she was still alive. You wanna end up like her?"

Bulbasaur stepped between Vulpix and Charmeleon. "Why don't you just cool down a bit?" the grass-type warned. "We're all just on edge because we can't see a thing past all this grass. If you don't calm down, though, you're going to set this whole place on fire with that tail of yours! And that'd certainly make it easy for the pokémon we're after to find us!"

The charmeleon crossed his arms and gave a snort of derision. "Shows how much you know. Any pokémon with visible fire on their bodies can control its temperature. It's barely warm enough to make a vanillite sweat. See?"

The charmeleon swung his tail around and held it out so that the flame was easily within reach.

Bulbasaur took a step back, his eyes trained warily on the tongue of reddish flame. "I'll pass," he said.

Charmeleon turned his head to Vulpix. "Come on, now, it doesn't hurt. And you call yourself a fire type… Surely you aren't afraid of a fire this small?"

I really don't feel any heat coming off of it, Vulpix thought to herself, though she didn't particularly want to test it. Then again, she doubted that Charmeleon would leave her alone unless she did as he wanted, so she lifted her paw and slowly brought it closer and closer until it was in the flame itself. True to the charmeleon's word, the flame was only pleasantly warm; far from hot enough to burn.

"See? It's fine," the charmeleon said with a glint in his eyes. "Well, unless I do this."

Before Vulpix could think to withdraw her paw, the fire suddenly flared up. She quickly pulled her paw back, but it stung; though her fur was mostly fireproof, her paws were much more vulnerable.

Charmeleon laughed. "You're such an idiot! I can't believe you fell for that!"

Vulpix looked down to the ground in shame as she tenderly licked her paw, trying to cool it down a bit.

"Can we just focus on the mission?" Bulbasaur said to Charmeleon, his gaze accusatory. "Or has your fire melted away what little brain you were born with?"

"You wanna do this mission so badly? Fine. We'll split up and look around. You head that way, I'll head this way, and Vulpix can go that way," the charmeleon said. "You good with that?"

"But if the pokémon finds one of us-"

"Then you scream and hope we can find you before he roughs you up too badly," Charmeleon said. "Any other objections?"

"Oh, um…" Vulpix started. *I can hear running water in the direction I'm supposed to go… It's gotta be the river I saw on the map. I don't want to go anywhere near any more rivers. Not after nearly drowning in one.*

"Yeah, wimp?" Charmeleon challenged. "You don't like my plan?"

She suddenly regretted speaking up. "Nothing," she mumbled.

"Then lets get going already!" Charmeleon said. "It's already midafternoon. At this rate we won't even get back in time for dinner, and you can bet I'll blame you for it! I don't want Deputy Zebstrika getting angry with me about something that's *your* fault."

Bulbasaur gritted his teeth in anger but didn't respond. Charmeleon was an evolved pokémon and, moreover, he had a type advantage against Bulbasaur. If it came down to a battle, the grass-type knew that he'd just get himself hurt.

So with that, they each headed off in their separate directions. Vulpix did so with dread filling her heart, and each step seemed to grow heavier than the last. She could hear the water flowing somewhere in front of her, but she had no way of seeing where it was. Grass rose on all sides of her, many times her own height, making it seem as if the entire world was closing in on her.

As the noise of the water got louder, she imagined that she might take a step through the thick grass and suddenly find herself falling face-first into the river. She imagined the cold water drenching her as it had in her first remembered moments in this world. She imagined it filling her lungs again, and she felt the cold from her pendant of ice seeping through her entire body, slowly-

She heard something move behind her and she spun around, only to be confronted with the same sea of grass from which she had emerged. But though she couldn't see more than a tail-length in any direction, she knew that *something* was out there, following her.

Her heart was pounding now. She'd been dreading the water so much that she hadn't been paying attention to the rest of her surroundings. There was a vicious pokémon on the loose, and it could be anywhere. She and Bulbasaur had been on a couple missions going after some petty criminals, but no one as powerful as this. She had to keep her guard up.

"Show yourself," she said quietly, somehow managing to keep her voice steady. "Who's there?"

She heard the grass shuffling a ways in front of her as the something approached. Her hackles rose as it got closer and closer until, finally, the grass just in front of her parted and Charmeleon came into view.

Vulpix relaxed, but only slightly. She watched him warily and, quiet even now, she waited for him to speak.

"I just wanted to have a little talk with you while we couldn't be interrupted by that stupid friend of yours," Charmeleon said when he saw that Vulpix wasn't going to speak first. His voice seemed casual, but Vulpix thought she heard a bit of a threat hidden within the façade of friendliness.

"Talk? About what?"

The charmeleon grinned. "Ah, nothin' much. I just thought-"

He cut himself off as he lunged forward, grabbing for Vulpix; she jumped back just in time to watch his sharp white claws cut through the air in front of her face, barely missing her.

A growl rose in the charmeleon's throat as tendrils of smoke leaked from his nostrils. "Hold still, why don't you? I *said* I just want to talk!"

He lunged again. Vulpix dodged and then fled. She didn't know what she'd ever done to make Charmeleon be so mean to her, but she wasn't going to let him get his claws on her if she could help it.

"Get back here!" Charmeleon said as he charged through the grass after her. Though he ought to have been slower than her under regular circumstances, Vulpix found it difficult to push through the mass of grass; she just didn't have quite the weight to easily get past. Charmeleon, on the other hand, wasn't having any problem.

Desperate, Vulpix shouted, "Bulbasaur! Please, Bulba-"

She cut herself off with a yelp and she dug her feet into the ground, desperately trying to arrest her momentum. She came to a full halt right as she came to the source of her original fear. The river that flowed through Tallgrass Plains was - though not fast by any means - very broad and deep, and it was the one thing able to override her instinct to flee from Charmeleon.

Before she could really think about turning and running another direction, she felt a clawed hand grab a couple of her tails and lift her into the air, dangling her upside-down.

"Hehe. Got you, you little brat," Charmeleon said, his fangs glinting in a smile.

"Let me go!" Vulpix said, twisting in pain. It hurt to be held up only by the tails. In desperation, she shot off an ember attack and managed to hit him in the face with a couple of the coals. He raised his free hand to block the embers soon after they started, though, and before Vulpix could do much damage, he slammed her down against the ground. She choked on a bit of fire as the air was forced from her lungs.

Before she could get on her feet again, Charmeleon had taken her by the tails again and was dangling her above the water.

She immediately stopped her struggling, too frozen with fear to risk having the charmeleon drop her. As she dangled and Charmeleon briefly caught his breath, another voice called out from not too far away.

"Vulpix! Vulpix, where are you! What's going on?"

"Answer him and I drop you," the charmeleon said threateningly. She stayed quiet, and he grinned in response. "You're nothin' special, you know that? You're pitiful, really. Can't even go near water. I noticed that back at the guild. Even when your buddy went swimming, you'd just sit as far away from the water as you could manage, eyeing it warily. So if you're such a wimp, why is it that everyone around the guild is giving you so much attention, huh?"

Vulpix was trembling now. She wasn't looking at Charmeleon; her eyes were transfixed on the water below her. Even this close to shore, it looked deep enough to go over her head. Logically, she would easily be able to get back onto dry land, but even going into the water for a second frightened her.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

Charmeleon blew smoke in her face, making her cough. "Yeah right you don't," he said. "Everyone's talking about how powerful you are for a couple of kids. With Bulbasaur I can understand since his parents were so strong, but you? You just appear out of a cave one day and are suddenly one of the strongest fire-types in the guild. I'm not standing for it."

"Vulpix! Call out if you can hear me!" Bulbasaur's voice was closer now, and it sounded more desperate; no doubt he was worried that Vulpix suddenly wasn't responding.

Lowering his voice even more, Charmeleon continued, "Well, if you think I'd let a sorry excuse for a fire-type like yourself just take the spotlight, you've got another thing coming. Your team itself says

what a sorry excuse for a pokémon you are - I mean, an amnesiac and an orphan? What a joke!"

That got her attention. Though she still kept her eyes trained on the water as if expecting it to jump up and grab her at any moment, she said, "What do you mean, orphan?"

"What, didn't he tell you?" the charmeleon said with a low chuckle. "The brat's parents were venusaur. Much too slow to outrun a fire, and much too large to maneuver through the trees. They're dead, and he knows it. Only reason we brought Bulbasaur back to the guild is because he kept trying to dive back into the fire to save his parents. Idiot."

Vulpix felt realization settle in her chest like a chunk of ice, chilling her to the bone.

So the crying at night… Saying that he thought his parents would understand if he stayed at the guild… All this time, they've been dead? Why didn't he tell me?

"Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you don't end up growing a big head on that pretty little body of yours," Charmeleon continued. "Well, I've got all I wanted to say out of the way. Now that that's all done, why don't I let you take a little swim to cool down?"

"No!" Vulpix shouted, her mind returning fully to her fear. "Let me go!"

"Vulpix!" Bulbasaur's voice sounded again as the two fire-types heard him running through the grass. Soon he broke out from among the tall stems and quickly took in the situation. He locked eyes with Charmeleon, glaring at him.

"Hey, Bulbasaur, long time no see!" Charmeleon said meanly. "Find that pokémon we're after yet?"

Bulbasaur simply continued to glare. "Put her down, Charmeleon! What's your problem, anyway?"

"If you want me to put her down, why don't you do something about it, you whiny little seedling?"

Bulbasaur didn't hesitate. From beneath his bulb two vines sprouted and extended. He was about to reach out with them to grab Vulpix, but before he could act, Charmeleon shot a red-hot stream a fire from his mouth, burning the grass just in front of Bulbasaur's face. The grass-type scrambled backwards, his eyes wide with fear.

"Hah!" Charmeleon laughed. "One team member that's terrified of a little water, and another that's scared to death of fire. You two really are pathetic."

"L-let her go!" Bulbasaur insisted, though he was clearly shaken now.

Charmeleon just grinned. "As I said, do something about it if you're so worried about her. Either that, or I'll drop her in the water."

Bulbasaur tried running towards Charmeleon this time, only to scrabble desperately off to the side as another flamethrower cut off his path, reducing the tall grass around Charmeleon to cinders and making a small, faintly smoking clearing at the side of the river.

What happened next occurred too quickly for Vulpix's eyes to follow. There was a blur of some green pokémon even larger than Charmeleon; it slammed into Charmeleon, knocking him over and making him lose his grip on Vulpix's tail in his surprise. That's when Vulpix stopped caring what was happening, and what the green blur might be. All she could focus on was the sound of her own scream as she tumbled helplessly into the embrace of the river.

As she had expected, the water was deep enough to go over her head. She soon felt her wet fur dragging her down and the chill of the water around her, and she started to panic. She struggled in vain

for a few moments as the current began to carry her away from shore, but she could do nothing; either due to the panic or some lack of knowledge on her part, she could barely even keep her head above water, let alone swim back to shore.

In a few more moments, though, Vulpix felt two long, slender vines grab her around her torso and lift her clear of the water before placing her gently on the ground. She immediately got to her feet and ran farther away from the water, fearing that it might somehow reach out to pull her back in should she stand too close.

"Are you okay?" Bulbasaur said, following behind her.

She nodded silently, though she was more than just a bit shaken up.

Bulbasaur sighed. "I guess I really am pathetic… I wouldn't even stand up to a bit of fire to save you. What kind of partner am I?"

A flash of light from a fire attack somewhere nearby caught Vulpix's attention. Quietly, she asked, "Shouldn't we go help Charmeleon?"

"You see? You don't even deny that I'm a bad partner…" Bulbasaur said.

Vulpix shook her head, her bright almond-shaped eyes searching Bulbasaur's face as she tried her best to read his emotions. "It's not that," she said tentatively, keeping her ears attentively swiveled in the direction of the ongoing battle. "I can understand. For me, a little water is the same… It's terrifying. And it's not nearly so destructive as fire."

In her mind, she added, *And I never lost something I cared about to water… If Charmeleon was telling the truth, then you lost everything in that fire. Not just your home, but your parents, too.*

"But I can't blame you for being afraid of water! Nearly dying in a river is your first memory!" Bulbasaur insisted.

"And I can't blame you for being afraid of fire, either. It's no different than my fear," Vulpix said. As she finished, she heard a pained and exhausted yell from somewhere in the grass ahead; to her great dread, she realized that the sound belonged to Charmeleon. With greater urgency now, she said, "Really, Bulbasaur… Right now, what's important is that we finish our mission. Right?"

Bulbasaur suddenly stood as tall as his squat body could manage, his qualms gone. For the moment, at least. "You're right. Let's get going. We can at least show Charmeleon who the *real* battlers here are."

The grass-type dashed off through the grass without another word, heading towards the last sounds of battle; Vulpix followed right behind, keeping her ears vigilantly pricked upward as she listened for any movement within the endless curtains of grass that surrounded and suffocated them.

One last, pained moan was what finally led them to Charmeleon. By the time they found him, he fire-type was lying unconscious on the ground, with serious gashes covering much of his body. The grasses around him were alternately scorched and cleanly cut down, showing roughly how the battle had progressed.

Yet there was no sign of his assailant within the makeshift battleground.

"I don't like this…" Bulbasaur said as he examined the damaged grass. "These blades of grass weren't cut by Charmeleon's claws - they aren't sharp enough for something like this. Did you get a good look at the pokémon from before?"

"No, I-" Vulpix cut herself off as she heard something in the grass to her right. She froze entirely as she focused all her energies on listening.

Bulbasaur frowned. "What is it? Is there something-"

"This way!" Vulpix said, dashing off in the opposite direction from the sound she'd heard.

Bulbasaur followed without a second thought; soon, though, even his lesser ears picked up the sound of something coming behind them. And it was gaining quickly.

"Why are we running? We have to fight it!" Bulbasaur said.

"I know! But Charmeleon would have been in the way back there," she said in an urgent undertone. "Now, though…"

She suddenly spun around and fired off an ember attack. The two heard a slight cry of pain, and as the grass in their line of sight singed and severed, they caught a glimpse of their attacker. His bipedal body was made up mostly of a tough, inflexible carapace-like hide; thin bug wings sprouted from his back, and in place of arms he had two massive scythes.

The pokémon quickly disappeared back into the grass, but his identity had already been revealed.

"Vulpix! He's a scyther - a bug and flying type," he said in an undertone as both looked around them warily, prepared to dodge an attack at a moment's notice. "He's-"

"Dodge!" Vulpix suddenly shouted, her keen ears picking up even the slightest movement nearby. But despite the warning, Bulbasaur - great battler though he was - could not do much when things came down to speed. Even Vulpix barely managed to get out of the way as the scyther came through, his blades extended; Bulbasaur barely had a chance to move.

Bulbasaur instinctively rolled with the blow as much as he could, but he could not avoid the worst of the damage. As he got back to his feet to prepare for the scyther's next appearance out of the grass, blood and sap seeped from a deep, X-shaped cut that extended from his bulb down to his side.

Vulpix wanted to ask her partner if he was all right, but Bulbasaur quickly interrupted.

"Vulpix, move!" Bulbasaur said as he dodged to the side, having apparently sensed an oncoming attack that Vulpix didn't detect. She jumped aside as well, just barely avoiding a razor-sharp gust of pressurized wind that cut through the thick grass as if it was nothing more than slightly thicker air. In its wake, the severed tops of the blades of grass seemed to hover in air, suspended in a moment in time; but, inevitably, they fell to the ground, creating an unimpaired view of their attacker.

Vulpix immediately switched to the offensive, firing off a powerful ember attack in the direction the razor wind had come from. She cut off the ember almost immediately, however, for three reasons. Firstly, she glimpsed the bug-type running out of the way, causing her attack to miss. Secondly, the already singed areas of grass were showing signs of lighting after this second round of fire attacks, and she didn't want to expose them to any more heat for fear of a full-blown grass fire breaking out.

And most importantly, Bulbasaur was scared stiff of the flickering beginnings of the flames.

I can't keep on doing this… Bulbasaur is terrified. It's my best attack, but… I shouldn't. Not if Bulbasaur can't stand it.

She heard Scyther coming in for another close-range attack, and knew immediately that he was coming in to finish off the job he had started with Bulbasaur. This time, Vulpix didn't call out to warn her partner. Instead, she jumped to intercept the attacker.

Due to the scyther's advantage of speed, the tackle that she landed was sloppy. But it did what she needed it to do. It distracted the scyther and forced him to use his slash attack on Vulpix, making a long but shallow scratch down her back. Her vision blacked out momentarily as she felt pain sizzle through her nerves to her brain.

Before the scyther could recover enough to use another attack and finish the stunned vulpix off, he was backing off as a hail of sharp leaves peppered his head and upper body. Soon he had disappeared back into the sea of grass.

As Vulpix quickly came back to full awareness, Bulbasaur said in a half-shout, "What are you doing? Use your ember, not tackle! You have the type advantage, and it's the only way we'll win!"

"But Bulbasaur, you-"

"Don't worry about me! Worry about staying alive!" Bulbasaur said, though his eyes still darted off towards the smoldering grass every now and then. "Besides, even if it's fire… If it's you…"

Whatever he was trying to say was cut off as he suddenly extended his vines above and past Vulpix, somehow managing to catch the scyther in the process of his sneak-attack; the scyther was targeting Vulpix now, understanding that her speed and type were the biggest threat to him. Bulbasaur somehow managed to grab both the scythes, one in each of his vines, effectively stopping him for the moment.

"Do it now!" Bulbasaur said, gritting his teeth in pain as the edges of the scythes dug into his vines. He kept his grip firm, though, managing to hold the scyther's blades nearly completely still despite the scyther's obvious struggling.

"But your vines-"

Bulbasaur's eyes were still wide with fear as he looked at Vulpix. In that glance, she saw that he still didn't trust her. Not completely. She was a fire-type, and he couldn't forget that. And he knew that his vines could get burned if she attacked now, while he was still immobilizing the enemy. He was afraid. He was afraid not just of the fire, but of the ones who could make that fire. In that sense, Vulpix was no better than Charmeleon, nor was she any better than the fire that had destroyed his home and changed his life.

Despite the obvious fear that seemed amplified in eyes filled with tears of pain, he shouted out, "Forget about the vines! Just do it!"

Vulpix wasted only one more moment to hesitation. Then, with all her might, she summoned the fire inside of her and propelled it outwards towards the scyther. To her surprise, the small but powerful embers of before were not what emerged from her body. Instead, a full-blown flamethrower shot towards Scyther and the vines that held him. The flames hit Scyther dead in the chest, but they also flared out from the point of contact, Small fires started in the grass nearby and began to grow, and Bulbasaur let out a scream as he withdrew his vines and began backing away.

Vulpix saw this and quickly cut off her attack. As scyther fell to one knee, Vulpix turned to Bulbasaur and took a step forward to join him. She stopped, though, as he backed away from her.

"Bulbasaur, I…" she started, her eyes apologetic. *I never should have gone through with it. I could have used the opportunity he gave me to land a solid tackle attack instead. It wouldn't have been an instant knock out, but it… It would have been better than this. Why did I have to learn flamethrower? Why now?*

Bulbasaur realized what he was doing and stopped retreating. But he didn't reply to Vulpix. He didn't seem quite able to do that yet. Instead, he did his best to stop the tremors of his body and looked past Vulpix, addressing the badly injured but not yet unconscious bug-type.

"Scyther, why have you been doing this?" he asked, the seriousness of his tone lessened by the fact that his eyes were still darting towards the small, barely self-sustaining fires. "Attacking pokémon out of the blue… Some have even died due to the viciousness of your attacks. That's not acceptable. So why? Who are you to come out of nowhere and do this for no reason, and with no warning?"

The scyther raised his head and, with an effort, stood up straight. Vulpix and Bulbasaur both tensed, but he made no move to attack.

"You gave me my first real challenge. You at least deserve to know my name," he said, his voice slow but steady. "Edge. My name is Edge. You'd best remember it, for I plan to challenge you some other time, after I've trained more. Until then, though, I shall take my leave."

Both Vulpix and Bulbasaur readied themselves to attack should he try to carry out his promise of running off. For a few seconds, though, they all just stood there, as the scyther made no attempt to move.

"Roots and shoots!" Bulbasaur suddenly cursed as he lashed out with his vines, heedless of the now dying flames. The vines reached the scyther and - to Vulpix's amazement - they passed right through him, dissipating the illusion. "A double-team? How did he still have the energy to do that? Vulpix, can you hear him - where'd he go?"

She could, in fact, hear something rustling through the grass. But it was already far away, and it was moving quickly.

Vulpix shook her head as she began to stamp out the remaining cinders. "We're too injured right now. Both of us. We wouldn't be able to catch up. And even if we could, we need to get our wounds treated before taking him on again."

Bulbasaur retained his frustration for only a moment longer before sighing and letting himself collapse to the ground. "You're right," he said, his eyes closed as he nearly disappeared into the sheared, stubby blades of grass he had been standing in. Only his bulb really showed up. "That's so irritating! I should've kept a hold of him, even during your attack. You were so close and aiming so well that at most, I might have been singed. I'm sorry, Vulpix. Mom and dad would be so ashamed of having a wimp like me as a son…"

It's not your fault at all… Not at all… Vulpix thought to herself. *I knew that you were terrified. I could have guessed that you were urging me on just to seem brave. But I put your well-being behind the necessity of the mission… You've done so much for me in the time I've been here, and this is how I repay you?*

"Bulbasaur…" Vulpix began. She wasn't sure how to put her guilt into words. In fact, she didn't think she could; she didn't want to admit she'd made a mistake, especially one as horrible as this. Instead, she moved to the one topic that was still on her mind. "About the fire that destroyed Emerald Forest…"

Bulbasaur pushed himself back off the ground, tilting his head slightly at the change in subject. "What about it?"

Your parents… Did they die in that fire?

She tried to say the question, but the words caught in her throat. She just couldn't manage it. There seemed something unspeakable about the question. Instead, she shook her head. "Nothing," she said.

Bulbasaur looked at her for a moment longer before turning around, letting the previous matter drop. "We'd best go wake that lazy charmeleon up… There's no way I'm gonna carry him all the way back to the guild."

"Oh, um, right," Vulpix said as she caught up with Bulbasaur. But her mind was distracted.

I attacked using a flamethrower, even though my partner is terrified of fire… And now I can't even work up the courage to ask him about his parents. If it's true, the knowledge is probably killing him… It's probably hurting him so much just to hide it. I know that. And yet, I… I can't even…

"Huh? Vulpix, is something wrong? You're awfully quiet all of a sudden."

Vulpix shook her head. "I'm… I'm fine."

Bulbasaur didn't quite seem to believe her. He let it slide, though. "You should quit worrying!" he said with a grin. "We may not have captured the criminal, but we at least showed Charmeleon up! Who

knows whether or not that scyther - Edge, didn't he say? - well, who's to say he wouldn't have finished Charmeleon off if we hadn't come around? That flame-brain will owe us big time for this! Not to mention, we salvaged the mission. We now know both his name and his species, and that'll be a big help for other teams that go after him!"

Vulpix barely listened. *He can even tell from my silence that I'm worried about something,* she continued to think as they waded through the grass, keeping an eye out for Charmeleon. *The kind of human I was… If I can be so insensitive to a pokémon who's helped me so much and been so kind, then I must have been a terrible person. That's the only explanation for it. Bulbasaur… I'm sorry. You deserve a better partner, but I'm too terrified of the world to let you go.*

Yet she was too ashamed to say these words aloud, and so they stayed buried in her heart as she put on the mask of her smile, trying to join in on Bulbasaur's optimism, for his sake as much as her own.

I finished this chapter just now at 11:40 PM and I'm putting it up now, just barely making my personal deadline. ^_^ Sorry for the delay.

Anyway, I'm hoping to make next Team Rebirth chapter ultimately less angsty… But then again, Vulpix is essentially all angst and uncertainty, so that might not happen. And Bulbasaur has plenty of angst-fodder as well, as you can see… So yeah. You might just have to deal with it… Hope it doesn't bother anyone too much.

Also, I'm having a lot of allusions to minor aspects of the PMD games in Vulpix's chapters. Her partner does all the talking while she says next to nothing (though she thinks to herself a lot); the whole mention of 'personalities = pokémon' in her first chapter; the guildmaster and deputy are very similar to Wigglytuff and Chatot… Etc. I'm hoping that they stay at minor allusions and nothing more; if it ever seems like I'm flat-out copying the games, then please let me know, because I don't want things to be like that.

And I want to give a quick shout-out to all my reviewers and readers so far! I've already got a little under 50 readers (if the story stats page is accurate) and already 31 reviews. ^_^ Really, you have no idea how great that is for me; I don't think I've ever had a story get this popular (by my standards) this fast. Thanks so much! And a lot of the reviews have been really helpful in addition to being encouraging, which is wonderful. I hope you all keep it up! They always brighten my day, simply because you're taking time to let me know what you're thinking.

Team Misfits

Chapter Five: Team Misfits

"Hey, Cody, you sulking in here again?"

Cody quickly wiped away the tears that had been building up in his eyes and stood up from his little bed of straw, turning around in the process to see Ryan standing in the doorway of Team Misfit's room.

The zigzagoon felt like he could've growled with annoyance. *Can't these pokémon just leave me alone?* "What do you want, Ryan?" he asked, his tone biting.

"Calm down there, buddy. I just want to talk," Ryan said, not taking offense at Cody's tone. "Anyway… Why're you coming in here and crying all the time whenever we're not on missions? Might as well live a little, I say. Staying in here all the time certainly can't help whatever you're worried about… But maybe me and the rest of Team Misfits could help, you know?"

"You want to help? Fine. Let me leave your stupid team. I've been here for weeks now and you're all just as intolerable as you were that first day," Cody replied.

"Ouch," Ryan said as he hit a paw to his furry chest in mock anguish, causing some dust and stray hairs to fly into the air. "That hurts, Cody. That hurts deep. You're never going to make friends if you're this mean to everyone."

"I don't want to make any friends. I don't need any friends, especially not here," Cody countered, his fur bristling as he glared at Ryan. "I just want…"

Ryan looked at him expectantly, his ears pricked forward attentively. "Yeah? You just want what? You can tell me, buddy! It'll help to get these things off your chest."

Cody let out a sigh. As much as he wanted to keep hating the minccino who stood before him, he just couldn't keep it up. "I just want to see my family again," Cody finally admitted. "I miss them, and I'm still no closer to figuring out how to turn back into a human again and get back to them."

"That's rough, I'll admit," Ryan said, nodding sagely. "Of course, I can't understand the sentiment that well… My own parents hated me, and I kinda hated them back. But you know, it's times like this that I feel we need to look on the bright side. Lisa's been keeping her mouth shut for once, so she and Isola and I are still the only pokémon who will think you're crazy. Well, I guess Guildmaster Elgyem knows, too, but he's so scatterbrained that he probably already forgot. And another good thing: you've got Team Misfits here, and we're dedicated to helping you out, even if we don't actually think you're completely sane."

Cody folded his short legs beneath him and lay back down on the ground. "Thanks a *lot*," he said sarcastically, his resentment for Ryan bubbling up inside him again. "Just what I wanted to hear. The only pokémon willing to help me are the ones who think I'm nuts. Not to mention, what sort of help are you? All we've done are your stupid guild missions so far - fighting off criminals, helping pokémon in need. That's all well and good, but it's not helping me at all."

Suddenly, Lisa's voice called from down the corridor. "Hey, Ryan! Cody! We got the mission approved! Let's head out already!"

Cody looked up questioningly as Lisa ran into the room, followed by the ever-jittery Isola. "Mission? What mission?" Cody asked. "I thought we were taking a break for today. Training or something."

A smug little cough drew Cody's attention back to Ryan. "Well, the mission was my idea, actually," the minccino said with a smile, his dirty fur puffing out a bit with pride. "You see, I just remembered that there's this one place that every pokémon avoids because it's rumored that humans live there… It's probably only stories and

rumors, but who knows? Maybe we'll find a clue as to what you're doing here as a pokémon."

This news did nothing to lift Cody's spirits; he was already in too much of a bad mood for that. "You're just taking me there so that you all can laugh at me when we don't find anything."

"Quit your whining already!" Lisa said angrily as she suddenly grabbed Cody's tail and began to pull him from the room. As he began to struggle against her grip (used to this treatment though he was), she continued, "If we find a clue, then we find it and we're all happy for you. If not? We'll keep looking for another place to investigate. Can't hurt to try, can it? Besides, if this place is so creepy that even the guild hasn't explored it, then there's a good chance there's some big treasure hidden away there!"

Cody finally ceased his struggling and simply rolled his eyes as Lisa continued to pull him by the tail down the hallway. "I see how it is. Can't help me out unless there's some ulterior motive, huh?" He glanced up at Ryan and Isola, who were following just behind and whom Cody was already facing, thanks to his current situation. Neither seemed particularly troubled by Lisa's roughness. Pleadingly, he said to them, "Can't you two help a guy out? At this rate, I'm gonna-"

Before he could react, Lisa suddenly pulled on the zigzagoon's tail with a mighty tug, swinging him around her body before tossing him in the air towards Isola and Ryan. Neither was surprised. Ryan simply watched with a smile while Isola ducked her head, clearing the way for Cody to land squarely on the doduo's back.

"Perfect aim that time," Ryan commented with a grin as Cody shook his head, trying to recover from the odd and somewhat painful sensation of being so suddenly thrown like that.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm awesome, I know," Lisa said as she gestured for Isola to bend down so that she and Ryan could get on. "Hey, Cody, how was the power of that one?"

Cody wagged his poor tail as he tried to make sure it was in working order. "Not as strong as last time," he said unhappily but honestly. "But could you please stop doing that out of the blue? Actually, stop doing it period, even when you warn me. I don't think my tail can take much more of it."

"But how am I going to practice my seismic toss without someone to throw?" Lisa asked, acting as if it was a perfectly legitimate question. "Besides, think of it this way - I *could* be doing the attack like I'm really supposed to, where I slam you to the ground instead of flinging you gently onto the soft feathered back of our dear friend Isola. Would you prefer that?"

Cody glared at her for a moment before curling up at the center of Isola's back, settling down for the ride. "You all are just a bunch of bullies. Every single one of you," he muttered resentfully.

"So what's this place called again?" Cody asked as he glanced around at this place that was at once both very familiar and so different from what he was used to. Old, crumbling buildings made of a scarlet colored rock towered on either side of the team as they walked down a street paved with the same crimson stone.

Though the buildings they walked among often differed in exact dimensions and construction, they all shared some similarities. All were generally square in shape, just like the sort of buildings Cody remembered from the human world and exactly unlike anything he'd seen here in the pokémon world; all of them had open doorways and windows that led to shadowy interiors empty of furnishings; and though the largest were two stories at most, they all made Cody feel incredibly small and vulnerable in a way that not even the massive jutting columns of rock of the Eastern Guild could manage.

"It's called Mysterious Ruins," Ryan answered. "It's really weird, isn't it? All the dens are just so… I dunno. Strange. And the hue of the rock…"

"They say it's dyed red from the blood of all the pokémon humans have snatched over the years," Lisa suddenly piped in with malicious enjoyment.

Isola, who had been traveling in the center of the group with her head dipped low, now let out a little squawk of fear. "Bl-blood? But, um, oh… Maybe we should come back some other time?"

Seeing her fear, Cody took pity on her. *She isn't so bad, at least… And she doesn't deserve to be scared out of her mind by her own teammates.* "You know, it's really not all that brighter than the reddish-brown stone of base," Cody said comfortingly. "It's just a slightly different color. So no blood involved, I'm sure. Didn't the wonder map show a place called Redstone Canyon somewhere around here? The rock probably came from there."

Isola looked to Cody and, for a moment, seemed to relax a bit as her worry left her.

Then Lisa spoke up again and her anxiety returned.

"So says the lunatic zigzagoon," the young kangaskhan said with a laugh before suddenly slowing down so that she was right next to Isola. Speaking softly so that Isola had to bend her long neck down to hear, Lisa continued, "But really, I've heard all sorts of stories about this place… They say that if you stay here too long, you'll start seeing the shadowy figures of humans as they flit behind the buildings, following your every move… And then, once they have you outnumbered, they slowly close in, their red eyes glowing brighter and brighter as they get closer… and closer… And then, when they're right on top of you, they… ATTACK!"

At the word, the little kangaskhan suddenly jumped up and grabbed onto Isola's neck; Isola immediately began to panic, running forward and shaking her head desperately.

Poor Isola… Cody thought to himself as Ryan and he watched the two girls, neither of them willing to come between Lisa and her idea

of fun. *She gets picked on almost as much as me. Why does she even stay? Was she forced into the team just like I was?*

Cody shook that possibility from his mind. That's not how it seemed. Aside from when she was being picked on, Isola seemed to enjoy being a part of Team Misfits, which mystified Cody.

Still feeling sorry for the doduo as he continued to watch her attempt to shake Lisa from her neck, Cody muttered to Ryan, "Don't you think Lisa could be a bit more mature? I don't think Isola exactly appreciates this."

"Well, Lisa *is* technically a baby," Ryan said with a smirk. "She shouldn't even be out of her mother's pouch."

"What did you say, Sir Fluffball?" Lisa said as she abruptly dropped off of Isola's neck and approached the two males.

Ryan backed up a step so that Cody was partially between him and Lisa. "It was the crazy zigzagoon that started it! He's the one who called you immature in the first place."

Before Cody could defend himself, Lisa was working herself up into a frenzy. "Oh yeah, Cody? Immature, am I? Bring it on and I'll show you-"

Cody didn't wait to hear any more; he promptly turned tail and fled before Lisa fulfilled her threat.

Hey! Get back here!"

"I'd rather not!" Cody said as he ran, not particularly in the mood for fighting the puny but powerful kangaskhan. Without daring to take the time to look back, he dashed down a side street and - due more to his natural zigzagoon tendencies than any planning on his part - he turned corner after corner, zagging from building to building until he was sure that he could no longer hear the scraping of Lisa's

claws as she ran after him. Only then did he duck into one of the many buildings to catch his breath.

"Sheesh. I've been beat up enough by her for one day, thank you very much," he muttered angrily to himself. "Why can't she just calm down for once? And Ryan… I may not be able to fight Lisa, but I'll definitely teach Ryan a lesson when we get back… Pinning the blame on me to get out of your own beating… Really, God, what did I do to deserve this?"

Cody looked up towards the lightless ceiling beseechingly, but no answer came to him.

After a few expectant moments, his ears and tail drooped disappointedly. "Well, I guess they do say that God helps those who help themselves…" He sighed. "Guess I'll head back to the rest of the group, then. Hopefully Lisa has calmed down by now."

He stepped back out of the building and looked around, only to realize that all the zigging in his retreat had left him completely and utterly lost in the maze of uneven streets and hollow buildings. The sun was already descending in the sky, so he at least had a little grasp of what direction to go… but that could only help so much. In actuality, he didn't even remember what direction they had entered the city from.

"Hey, Cody, where'd you go!" Ryan's voice suddenly echoed through the air, surprisingly loud considering how small of a pokémon he was.

"Stripes-for-brains, I ain't gonna hurt you! Much! Just come on back!" Lisa's voice said as well, mixing with the echoes of Ryan's shout.

Cody turned right and looked down the street in the direction the sound had come from. Aside from that general direction, though, he was having difficulty pinpointing exactly where they were; the calls echoed around the buildings strangely, making it seem as if the

voices could have been coming from either directly ahead of him, from either side, or anywhere in between.

He drew a big breath to call back to them, but quickly caught himself before he had said anything.

This could be a great way to get back at them for everything, Cody thought to himself, a smile creeping onto his face. *They might freak out if they think something's happened to me… Or at the very least, I can stay hidden for a while before popping out and scaring them half to death. That'd teach that little brat of a kangaskhan who's boss.*

He chuckled to himself and, as he turned and trotted off in the other direction, he muttered to himself, "Besides, this place isn't so scary that I can't explore it by myself. I mean, I'll probably even get more done by myself than I would with those lazy goofballs around."

"Cody! Cody, this isn't funny! Where are you!" Ryan's voice continued to call out, this time with worry that was audible even in his shouting.

Cody simply turned a corner and kept on trotting along, keeping his naturally inquisitive eyes peeled for anything of interest as he peeked into building after building.

"Cody! You little brat, come out already! I was just joking before - I'm not going to actually hurt you!"

Cody let out a snort of derision at Lisa's shouted claims. "Yeah, right. You were ready to go all-out, just like you always do. I hate you most of all. Then Ryan, since he doesn't do anything to stop you. And Isola - she could at least be less of a giant chicken and actually grow a spine. I feel sorry for her, sure, but she needs to stand up for herself. Hmph. I really ought to just leave them and this city behind… Who needs 'em?"

"Cody!" This was Isola's voice now, even more strident than those of Ryan and Lisa. Cody had never heard her talk in anything more than

a loud murmur; hearing her call out like this was something new. "Where are you? Are you hurt? Did something happen?"

Only now did Cody feel guilt worm its way into his heart, but he quickly brushed it aside.

They're shouts are getting louder, so that means they're coming this way, anyway, he reasoned. *They'll find me soon enough. Until then, they can just keep on worrying.*

A few more minutes passed before the rest of the team stopped calling out with such frequency, though they still let out a shout every now and then despite Cody's unresponsiveness. Rather than soothe him, the increased gaps in their shouts brought further unease into Cody's heart; the silence itself seemed to accuse Cody, and it weighed on his heart more loudly than any of their shouts.

"What? It's not my fault that they're all bullies," Cody muttered to himself as the shadows cast by the sinking sun made the buildings feel as if they were looming over him, awaiting their chance to devour the little zigzagoon. "They deserve to be a bit worried about me. They ought to think a bit more about how I feel about being batted around like some punching bag…"

But I'm not the only punching bag, another part of his mind suddenly spoke up. *That's just how Lisa acts around everyone else. It's like how me and my siblings wrestle all the time, probably… We get hurt now and then, but it's all in good fun.*

Cody tried to shake that thought from his mind. He didn't want to feel sorry for the rest of the team and how much they might be worrying now. If he wanted to roughhouse, then he'd get back to his family and his own world. That was all there was to it. It simply didn't matter if the rest of the team was worried.

"I just want to get back to my family… That's all," Cody asserted to himself; when his eyes started tearing up, he angrily tried to blink them away. "Why can't Lisa and everyone just understand that I want

to go home, instead of treating everything like a game? I just miss my family… And I'm just so confused. Am I dead? Did I die and then end up here somehow?"

Tears were now streaming down his face, and they came harder as he suddenly heard all three of his teammates call his name in unison. Still, he didn't respond as he sunk to the ground, collapsing into a miserable heap of jagged brown fur. "Maybe the rest of the team might actually know what happened. Maybe I should tell them that I remember dying. But…" He suddenly shook his head and got to his feet, squeezing the remaining tears from his eyes. "No! They don't even believe that I'm a human. How would they believe that I'm dead? I don't even believe it! I don't want to believe it! But that memory… That is what happened, isn't it? I don't remember anything after that. Maybe-"

Something caught his eye and he glanced up just in time to see something looking at him before it withdrew its head behind the corner of a building just ahead. Due to the angle of the sun and the placement of the shadows, the thing was mostly silhouetted; it took him a moment to process what he had seen.

But as soon as the sight registered, Cody's eyes opened wide with shock as he stared at the empty space where it had been. "No… It couldn't have been… I know these are all human-ish buildings, but…"

Without another thought, he dashed towards where the face had been. *It was a human face, right? It was! I know what I saw! But it seemed wrong, too… Something seemed off.* His tears were gone now, as was his misery. He didn't think that what he had just seen was a human, really, but his curiosity was roused nonetheless.

He turned the corner only to see a flash of movement as whatever-it-was disappeared down another street. He followed it single-mindedly, now completely deaf to the occasional cries of his team.

But if that is a human… Or even if it's something that was once a human, like I was… Maybe it can tell me what's going on!

When Cody rounded the corner this time, he briefly saw something disappear into one of the doorways along the street.

"Come back!" Cody shouted as he raced after it, not caring anymore whether or not the rest of his team found him. "Please, I just want to talk to you!" *Why is it running? I'm hardly an intimidating pokémon!*

He followed it inside and found himself in a broad but simple building. It had only one large room with a high ceiling, yet despite its size there were no windows; the only light for Cody to see by came from the doorway through which he'd entered. As Cody paused in the doorway to let his eyes adjust, he heard his team's calls more loudly.

I want to figure out what's going on before they get here, Cody thought to himself. *This is my business. If they don't want to believe that I'm human, then they can just butt out. I'll figure things out for myself.*

As he became accustomed to the gloom, he realized that unlike every other building in this abandoned town, this one had something large sitting in the very center of the room.

That's strange, he thought, his original target completely forgotten as he gazed upon the strange, roughly rectangular object; it was a bit taller than Cody himself was, and a couple times as long. *I wonder what it is?*

As he approached, he noticed that the item seemed almost to glimmer, reflecting the rays of scarlet light that filtered in through the doorway and making it seem to glow in the darkness. It was only when Cody put his forepaws on the top of the object that he scented metal in the air and realized with awe what he was leaning on.

Beneath his paws was a simply decorated sarcophagus made of pure gold.

He got over his awe quickly as a smile spread across his face. *Take that, Lisa! I'm the one to find the treasure! And I'm not sharing it with you, that's for sure!*

His curiosity overruling his caution, Cody jumped up on top of the sarcophagus to better examine the decorations that covered the lid. For the most part, it consisted of alternating bands of gold and a bluish metal of some kind. At about where the head of its occupant would be, Cody saw a roughly hewn mask of gold that - despite not having any pupils carved into the metal - seemed to be staring at him.

"Cody! Cody, where'd you go!"

Cody jerked his head around to look at the door. Team Misfits' voices were closer now; their proximity made Cody nervous as he realized that he still hadn't figured anything out about either this sarcophagus or the mysterious face from before. He promptly turned his head back to the coffin beneath his feet, hoping to maybe figure something out from the patterns that decorated its surface.

However, his urgency quickly turned to confusion as he realized that the coffin was not the same as it had been before. The pattern had slid apart in places, revealing what almost looked like a row of jagged white teeth in addition to a gaping black hole to the inside of the coffin.

"Maybe I pressed a button or something?" Cody said to himself as he bent down closer to the hole, hoping to see inside. The zigzagoon stared in vain for a few moments, trying to make out something that seemed to be hiding just within the darkness; but even his eyes, which could see well even in the dark interior of this room, simply couldn't pierce the darkness within the sarcophagus. He leaned in ever closer, narrowing his eyes and tilting his head at weird angles

as he tried to make out something that seemed to be there, just within the veneer of blackness.

Then, suddenly, Cody let out a blood-curdling scream as two glowing red eyes appeared in the darkness just in front of his face.

He scrambled backwards but, before he could get away, a shadowy hand had grabbed him around the middle and was holding him in midair as he kicked and wiggled and did all he could to possibly escape from the strangely ethereal grip.

But though the grip on him was tight and solid, his scratches passed straight through the wisps of darkness.

He was jostled as, suddenly, the sarcophagus stood up, all of its surfaces now shrouded by the same darkness that held Cody aloft. Three other hands emerged from the sides of the coffin and, as Cody continued to struggle, they all reached up and squeezed him ever tighter until he was rendered completely immobile.

"Let me go!" Cody said, panicking now. This pokémon was massive, and he had no idea how to fight it. Actually, Cody wasn't even sure if it was a pokémon. What pokémon could possibly have the body of a coffin? No - surely this was some sort of monster, in which case Cody wanted to get away form it as soon as possible. "What do you want with me? Just let me go already!"

The thing suddenly tightened his grip, cutting off Cody's breath.

"Why are you here?" the thing asked, its masculine voice low and dangerous.

"I just… I just wanted to find out about humans," Cody gasped out.

"You lie," the thing whispered between its sharp teeth. "And I will make you regret ever setting foot in this place."

"No, I'm not lying! Really, I'm not!" Cody insisted as three of the hands let go of him while the forth continued to hold him aloft; but though several of the hands were gone, their shadows still lingered, wrapping his body like black strips of cloth. And as Cody looked at them, he realized these strips were growing, snaking up to cover more of his body, slowly but surely encroaching on his head.

The zigzagoon resumed his frenzied struggles. "Dear God, no, it's not a lie! What are you doing? Let me-"

"Let the crazy zigzagoon go!"

Cody's heart soared with hope as Lisa bounded in through the open doorway, ran over, and body slammed the golden sarcophagus, sending the thing flying backwards. Cody hit the ground along with his captor, but unfortunately for him, the ghostly hand kept its hold on his body. The coffin pushed itself up from the ground almost immediately, hardly phased by Lisa's attack. It narrowed its eyes as Ryan and Isola entered the room, further tilting the odds against it.

"Woah, wait, what is this stuff?" Lisa suddenly said as she looked down at her body, which was now draped with a few of the shadowy strips that were continuing to encase Cody's body.

"I don't know, but get me out of it!" Cody said, panicking again as his own wisps of darkness traveled up his neck.

Lisa suddenly looked up to Cody and remembered the real problem. "Oh, right, I'm on it!"

Unlike with the bonds enveloping Cody, the ones on Lisa seemed like nothing more than nuisances; they did nothing to hinder her as she charged forwards again, her paw held at the ready for a mega punch attack.

The ghostly pokémon did nothing to stop her. Cody braced himself as the punch landed, ready to be thrown back again along with his captor; but nothing of the sort happened. To Cody's amazement,

Lisa's entire body went straight through the otherwise apparently solid body of the sarcophagus. Unable to compensate for her surprise, she tumbled head over tail until she hit the opposite wall with a loud *thud* .

Before she could recover, the sarcophagus had gathered her up in one of his other hands.

With a spiky-toothed grin, the sarcophagus spoke once again. "You will all regret having strayed within this city, trespassers!"

Lisa, having recovered her wits, began struggling against the shadowy grip that held her. "What in Terrakion's name is going on? My body slam worked perfectly fine just a minute ago!"

"It's a ghost-type, Lisa!" Ryan called out. "Normal-type attacks aren't going to work!"

"But I'm normally fine with ghost-types! I-"

She was cut off as the sarcophagus attacked, this time reaching towards Isola and Ryan with its two free hands. Isola dodged, but Ryan instead took an offensive approach; the hairs on his tail suddenly bristled with a steely hardness and, right as the hand nearly had him, he swung out with the now solid bludgeon. The sarcophagus jerked both hands back in pain, but not before the afflicted hand had left behind more of the shadowy bandages on the minccino's body.

The sarcophagus grinned once again. "You will all be mummified, starting with your friend here," it said, dangling Cody out for all to see. The shadows had continued to grow during the exchange of blows; only his eyes and muzzle were still free of the shadows.

"Come on, guys, get me out of here already!" Cody shouted with some difficulty, his eyes wide with terror; at the very edges of his vision, he could see the oncoming darkness. *I don't even want to think about what will happen if this stuff completely encases me!*

"Working on it!" Lisa said as the whole area suddenly lit up with a bright flash of light as her paw suddenly caught on fire. The sarcophagus, stunned by the sudden attack, dropped her.

She backed up a couple steps and then, with a wide smirk on her face, said, "Well, looks like I really *am* limited to non-normal attacks. I think I'll manage." The fire disappeared from her paw and was instantly replaced with electricity as the young kangaskhan ran in for her next attack.

Ryan grinned as his own fur began to crackle with electricity. "Come on, Isola, we can't let her have all the fun, can we?"

Before Lisa's attack could land, a weak lightning bolt attack arced from Ryan to the sarcophagus, frying both it and its captive. Cody yelped in pain as the electricity raced through his body, but in a moment he found that it was worth the pain; the sarcophagus dropped him unceremoniously to the floor, finally unable to keep up with the barrage of attacks.

In another moment, before the ghost could recover, it was slammed against the rear wall of the room by Lisa's thunderpunch attack.

The ghost recovered quickly, but not quickly enough; all Isola needed was a couple of moments for her long legs to carry her across the room. Before the sarcophagus could raise its hands to defend itself, she drove her beak into the gap in its armor, right between its eyes.

Isola immediately withdrew her beak, and the sarcophagus teetered for a moment before the ornate part closed back up, the shadowy hands withdrew, and the whole thing fell onto its side.

Everyone stayed tense for a moment longer, as if expecting it to get up and attack. Everyone, that is, except for Cody.

"Hey, hello! Did you all forget about little old me, wrapped up like a present on Christmas? Get me out of this stuff already!"

"Oh?" Ryan said, looking down at his tail, which - like Cody - was still wrapped in strands of shadows. "I guess the stuff didn't go away when we knocked him out. What is it, anyway?"

Lisa started ripping the strips off of her own body. "I dunno, but it's annoying. Do we even know what that pokémon was?"

"I don't care what it was, just get me out of here!" Cody shouted, trying and failing to break his own bonds.

Isola started forward to help him, but Lisa got in front of her and gestured for her to stop. "Nah, Cody's got some explaining to do first. So, why didn't you answer us when we were calling for you earlier?"

Cody scoffed. "Why? You guys are jerks, that's why! Question isn't why didn't I run, the question is why didn't I get as far away from you all while-"

"We were worried about you, Cody," Isola suddenly interrupted, her voice quiet yet somehow commanding as well.

And here's the guilt again… Gosh darn it, Isola is just too darn good at making me feel bad! Cody took a deep breath, tried his best to get rid of his earlier anger, and responded more calmly, "Look, I'm sorry about that. I was just… I was just annoyed, is all."

He hesitated for a moment and then, in little more than a mumble, he added, "And thanks for saving me and stuff, too."

Before Cody had quite finished speaking, Lisa reached out and started ripping off the shadows, which dissolved into midair as soon as they were severed from Cody's body. She was a bit rougher than Cody quite appreciated, perhaps, but for once he wasn't about to complain; he was just glad to stop feeling like he was being mummified alive.

"You see, Cody! A little gratitude never hurt anyone, did it?" Lisa said with a satisfied grin as she got rid of the last of the shadows.

"Anyway, speaking of us saving your tail… How'd you get into this mess, anyway?"

Cody smiled sheepishly, feeling kind of stupid now that he thought about it. "Well, I thought I saw a human, or something human-like. I followed it in here, and then found this sarcophagus thing, and then… Well, you saw the rest."

"Sar-cough-a-whatsit?" Ryan asked.

"Human word, don't worry about it," Cody said, not exactly wanting to explain the concept. "Anyway, what are we going to do with it - him - whatever?"

"I guess wait until he wakes up," Ryan said. "Then we'll force him to come back to base with us. I mean, he pretty much tried to kill you. He's gotta face some sort of punishment."

"Don't take him!"

All four teammates suddenly spun around to find another figure in the darkness of the room. Cody's eyes were first drawn to the young female human face that seemed to float in midair, though he saw immediately that it was nothing more than a mask made of the same sort of gold as the sarcophagus. Only after examining the face did he see that it was attached to a small dark pokémon that hovered in midair.

Before Lisa could attack the newcomer (as it appeared she would, at first glance), Cody shouted out, "You're the thing I was following before! The face I saw… Was that your mask?"

"Yes!" the little pokémon said, her ghostly body bobbing up and down happily before she sobered up and added, "And I'm really sorry all this happened! I, um… Oh, the rest of me was invisible, but I can't make the mask invisible! That's why - I wasn't trying to trick you or anything! I just-"

"Calm down there, little lady," Ryan piped up. "Why don't you just start from the beginning?"

The pokémon took a deep breath and said, "Right. Sorry. I'm Yamask. There's a lot of us around here, but we stopped showing ourselves to outsiders a long time ago… They were all either scared of us, or the mean ones came after us for our masks so that they could sell them; apparently, some pokémon think that it being a human mask and all that it has some power over pokémon, making them more likely to listen to you or something, so… So we normally hide if pokémon come through here. But, um… I saw you crying, Zigzagoon, and I wanted to see if there was anything I could do. I guess I forgot that my mask was visible, though… When you saw me, I kind of panicked and ran to Cofagrigus. He's the one that always chases away visitors who overstay their welcome."

"Chase away?" Cody asked incredulously. "He was trying to kill me!"

"No, really, he wasn't!" Yamask insisted, her voice pleading. "He was just using a specialized version of an ability we yamask and cofagrigus have! It normally just blocks abilities, but he's made it to be a sort of scary way to knock out a pokémon. He would have just taken you outside the city's limits and taken off the shadows, and then you probably would have woken up never wanting to go through that experience again. That's how every other pokémon reacts. It keeps pokémon away."

Lisa crossed her arms as she tapped her tail thoughtfully against the ground. "Well, in that case, guess it's not so bad… But you can't just attack pokémon for no good reason."

"Speak for yourself…" Cody muttered.

"But if we don't do attack pokémon… Then pokémon will come after us again," Yamask said as she let her mask hang sadly downwards; Cody thought that the expression on the mask looked sad as well, but he might've been imagining it.

"Nah, that won't be a problem!" Ryan said cheerily. "We'll let the whole area know to be nice to you all if you all are nice first. We're from the guild, you know, so what we say goes. And if anyone tries to mess with you, everyone from the guild will come to help. It's our job!"

Yamask looked doubtful. "I don't know… It's really not a decision for me to make. Everyone else needs to know. Especially Cofagrigus - he's sort of in charge."

"We'll stick around until you make your decision, then. It's too late for us to head back to the guild tonight anyway," Ryan said. "Sound good with you?"

"Oh, that should be fine, I think!" Yamask said brightly. "The others shouldn't mind too much… Especially since you're forgiving Cofagrigus for attacking you like he did."

Isola suddenly stepped forward a bit, drawing all eyes to her. She dipped her head shyly and, addressing Yamask, she said, "You yamask wouldn't happen to be the pokémon that are humans reborn as pokémon, are you?"

"Woah, wait, what?" Cody said before the Yamask could respond. "You knew about a pokémon like that and didn't tell me?"

Isola seemed to physically shrink at the accusation. "I didn't remember it until just now… I'm sorry… Besides, they have to die first in order to become pokémon, and that didn't happen to you…"

Cody paled at how Isola's description seemed to fit him word for word, despite the fact that he had never told anyone else about remembering his dying day. However, the coincidence was quickly shattered.

"That's not true, actually, although that rumor is why a lot of pokémon are afraid of us," Yamask said. "That's like saying that a pokémon could be reborn as a ghost pokémon, just because they're

ghosts… It just can't be done. Us ghost-types really aren't any different from you all in that sense, and like you all we die and stay dead. But despite all that, we *do* have species memories of humans. We know things about them that we don't know how we know. That's how we built this city so long ago, using memories of human places."

"So what, you're saying humans actually exist?" Lisa asked skeptically. "Like, for sure for sure?"

Yamask nodded. "Definitely. Or, at least, they did at one time… Or they do, but somewhere else. We're not sure. But humans are definitely not imaginary."

"Wow. That's something," Lisa said, a smile on her face. "Guess you're not quite as crazy as we thought, Cody!"

Cody sighed. "Yeah, I guess…" he said. Then, turning to the exit, he said, "I'm stepping outside for a bit."

This still doesn't help me at all… he thought to himself as he stepped out the door, ignoring the quizzical stares he felt burning into his back as he walked out. *Yamask said that humans can't become pokémon, and that you can't die and be reborn… So why am I here? And how do I get back?*

Cody heard several sets footsteps behind him, but he ignored his team as they came out the door after him. Instead, he settled down and looked down the street, pretending to be transfixed as the rosy hues of the setting sun made the buildings around him seem to glow, emphasizing the natural red of the stone in a way that would have been absolutely beautiful, had Cody been paying attention.

"What's wrong?" Isola finally asked as she, Lisa, and Ryan came and stood next to him.

Cody still didn't look at his team as he replied, "You know, I just thought that maybe I'd find a way back home. Or at least get some hint as to why I'm here… Guess I just got my hopes up too high."

Cody heard a shuffle of movement behind him and then felt a weight press down on him as Ryan suddenly sat down on his back; Cody wrinkled his nose as the almost musty smeel of the minccino's fur overwhelmed him. "Cheer up, Cody!" Ryan said as he ruffled the fur on the zigzagoon's head. "You can bet we'll find something soon. If it's something you want that badly, then it's definitely worth putting more effort into finding something out."

"Besides, this was a fun mission," Lisa added. "If we get to explore cool places like this all the time, then I don't see any reason why *not* to look around for more clues, my crazy little friend."

" *Little* friend?" Ryan repeated skeptically. "I think you need to reexamine exactly who the little one is here."

A grin suddenly lit up Cody's face as he felt Ryan get knocked off of his back as he and Lisa immediately devolved into a tumble of punches and kicks and snide, mid-battle remarks.

Guess I saw that one coming… I think Ryan was literally asking for it that time. The grin on Cody's face grew as, jokingly, he thought, *Stupid little furball. It's so obvious he just wants Lisa's attention.*

And before he quite knew it, he was laughing as he watched the two small pokémon rolling around in the street, heedless of how immature they were acting. At the same time as his own laugh began, Cody heard a sort of squawking chuckle rise in Isola's long throat.

They both paused their laughter and looked at each other with surprise.

"I don't think I've heard you laugh before," Cody commented, too bemused by the thought to quite know how he felt about it.

"Same to you," Isola said, tilting her head as if she, too, was confused about how to react.

They both looked at each other for another moment before the both simultaneous broke out into laughter once again, this time so loud that Ryan and Lisa both stopped mid-attack in order to look at them.

"What's gotten into them?" Lisa asked.

Ryan grinned. "The same thing that's gotten into us, I'd bet," he said before following through with a tail slap attack.

The two devolved into battle once again, and Lisa and Cody fell further into their laughter. And though the sun soon sank below the horizon, its warm, rosy light still tinted the sky, illuminating the team of misfits as they enjoyed the end of their eventful day.

So, a couple of fun things about this chapter… Firstly, there was the obvious reference to Cofagrigus's Mummy ability (which I took some creative liberties with), but also a not-so-obvious reference to one of Kangaskhan's abilities, Scrappy. ^_^ Just in case you didn't catch that. The interaction of those two abilities was a lot of fun to play with.

Also… Has anyone notice that in PMD Sky (and maybe Time and Darkness too, I'm not sure), there's an item called Golden Mask that maxes out recruitment rate? Yeah, it's there. Have you also ever noticed that there are no humans in this pokéworld for the golden mask to be modeled off of? And did you notice that there just HAPPENS to be a 5th gen pokémon that carries a GOLDEN MASK! Yeah, it's true. So never use that item; someone had to steal it from a yamask for your team to benefit. And that's just not nice.

Anyway, I'm finally getting into the swing of things with Cody; I think my issue with him to begin with was that if I knew him in real life and he was exactly as I imagine him, then I would pretty much hate his guts (even though he's really not a bad guy by any means; it'd just be a personality clash). And so he ends up annoying me when I'm writing… But I'm getting past that, especially since his character development is starting a bit.

Thanks for reading, and I hope you're still enjoying it!

Max

Chapter Six: Max

"I really, really, *really* think that this is a bad idea," Max insisted to Luxio as the duo trailed to the rear of a group of several Southern Guild teams. "I'm not going to be any help. Can't I just head back now?" He looked around nervously at the verdant, forested hills that they were walking among. Despite the beauty, he couldn't enjoy the scenery; with every step, he imagined powerful pokémon jumping out and attacking, making him suddenly regret wanting to lag at the back of the group.

Luxio looked over to Max with a disapproving scowl. "Quit complaining already. We're already nearly there, so there's no use turning around now. Besides, if you're so sure you won't be any help, why didn't you just ask the guildmasters to take you out of this mission?"

"I did!" Max replied, his scaly tail twitching with annoyance. "But Guildmaster Braviary wouldn't even hear me out!"

"Is someone talking about me back there!" Braviary's voice suddenly shouted from the front of the group.

Max shrunk visibly as a nearby vibrava spoke up. "As a matter of fact, I was," Vibrava said, her voice blending with the hum of her wings; Max couldn't tell if she'd been actually talking about the guildmaster as well, or if she was just using this opportunity to address him. Regardless of the reason behind it, she continued, "Guildmaster, when in Zekrom's name are you going to tell us where we're going and what the mission is?"

"I think we'd *all* like to know!" Luxio piped up. "What's such a big deal that even with some of the guild's strongest pokémon here, you still

felt you had to come along? Sheesh, I could be exploring right now if not for this stupid mission…"

Guildmaster Braviary let out a hearty laugh in response. "I haven't told you all yet?" he asked loudly as he strutted along in front of the group of twelve. "Silly me! Well, I might as well leave it to the client to tell you what's up! Joltik, would you mind explaining?"

A yellow dot of a pokémon suddenly appeared from among the mess of feathers atop Braviary's head.

"Wait, the client's been here the whole time?" Vibrava said, the surprise in her own voice reflecting the shocked looks on everyone else's faces.

"Oh, yeah, I have been. The name's Joltik," the yellow pokémon said, her voice strong and confident, though somewhat high-pitched due to her small size. "You don't mind me talking from up here, do you Guildmaster Braviary?"

Braviary chuckled and replied, "Of course not! My mate'll probably be happy to hear that I actually used my head for once, though maybe not in the way she's always wanted!"

The joltik did her best to look amused, but it was clear that her mind was on other things. "Sorry for not showing myself earlier, everyone," she said as she turned back around to address the guild members. "I came straight from Sheltered Vale to the guild without any breaks. I guess I pushed myself too hard, but… Well, it's an emergency."

"She came all this way without any breaks?" Max whispered incredulously to Luxio. "It's taken us two days just to get close to Sheltered Vale!"

"Shhh!" Luxio admonished. "Just listen!"

The joltik, unaware of the hushed murmurs, continued, "A couple months ago, a large group of different pokémon came to our valley

from farther up north. They said that their own forest had died from the encroaching ice, and so they made themselves at home in our home. We wanted to sympathize, but… Well, they forced us to let them stay, and they've been treating us natives of Sheltered Vale like slaves ever since. They take most of our food, they beat up anyone who gets in their way, and they pick on whoever they want to. It's miserable.

"There's more of us than them, of course. But to be honest, there's only one or two capable battlers in the entire valley. We've always gotten along well with each other, and since outsiders rarely stumble upon the valley, we never really needed to battle except for fun. We've been essentially helpless. But we're all very proud, and we didn't exactly want to turn to outsiders like you all for help."

The tiny electric-type said this all very matter-of-factly, as if - contrary to her descriptions of misery - she really didn't mind that much.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Rhyhorn, another guildmember, interjected. "If these bullies have been there for a couple months and you didn't want our help, what's changed? Why the sudden emergency?"

Angry sparks suddenly poured off of Joltik's body with such ferocity that Guildmaster Braviary let out a little caw of indignation; the bug-type had to consciously calm herself down before she could continue, and even then she spoke with rage clearly evident in her voice. "It's that stupid deerling!" she said, seeming like a completely different pokémon from the mild-spoken joltik of before. "Actually, she's not stupid at all. She's a genius, and that's what's getting her into trouble! She walked into our valley about a week ago. She seemed sort of lost. We told her to leave before she got caught up in everything, and before we knew it, she was purposefully messing with the brutes! Not directly enough that they could ever prove it was her, but that doesn't stop them from having their suspicions. And they're not afraid to let her know that they don't appreciate it.

"She gave us all a lot of hope at first, just to see *someone* standing up to them after so long of doing nothing," the joltik said, her mood shifting dramatically again to something more akin to despair. "And when the brutes started picking on her in retaliation, she even fought back. She's an amazing battler - only the strongest fire-type could actually win again her. But… Well, it's just not enough. If she beats one of them, then five more come to take her down. In the last couple days before I left, she'd been purposefully losing the battles, but that's not enough to satisfy them anymore. Just seeing her is enough to provoke them into battle, and they do more and more damage every time… I think the leader is planning on getting rid of her once and for all. And I just can't even stand the thought of that!"

"Ouch!" Braviary squawked as a flood of sparks cascaded from the yellow ball of fluff. "All right, all right, we get the picture, just cut it out with the electricity already!"

The sparking abruptly stopped as the joltik buried herself more deeply in the ruff of feathers. "Sorry," she said, her voice quiet. "It's just… I may not have known her for long, but Deerling has got a sort of bravery that you don't come across every day. None of us in the valley want her to be killed. That's why I came to ask you all for help."

"Surely there was some flying pokémon who would have been able to reach us more quickly?" Vibrava questioned.

"Everyone else in the valley is still too proud to admit that the problem is escalating and that we need help," Joltik explained. "Some of them even resent that Deerling has been interfering, since she's not from the valley. But she just kept on helping anyway."

Luxio suddenly grinned and bumped into Max. "Sounds like a female version of you, huh?" he said, his earlier annoyance at Max's complaining gone. "Jumping into danger without being asked and all."

"I've told you over and over again, I'm not anywhere near that brave," Max replied in a whisper. Luxio just rolled his eyes as he turned his attention back to the whole group's conversation.

"So what sort of pokémon will we be up against, anyway?" Rhyhorn was asking.

"As I said, it's a bunch of different species," Joltik replied. "But they're all pretty similar. A simisage, a simipour, a simisear… Then there's Primate and Ambipom, who're more violent than the other three. And all of them have small groups of lackies of their pre-evolutions."

Vibrava zipped up closer to Joltik. "And the leader you were talking about? Which one is he?"

" *She*," Joltik corrected. "She's a monferno, and she's strong enough that she can keep leadership of the troop even though she doesn't have a bunch of little chimchar to back her up."

"So a little more than one of us for each of their leaders, huh?" Luxio said aloud. "Too easy, considering who we have here."

"Couldn't agree more, but my dear Truvel wanted us to be safe rather than sorry," Guildmaster Braviary said. Then, flapping his wings out a bit, he added more quietly, "Joltik, we're almost there, aren't we?"

Joltik peeked out as high as she could from the creamy white nest of feathers. "Yeah, it's just up ahead," she confirmed. "The pass between those two hills is one of only a couple easy ways into the valley."

"You call those hills?" Luxio asked incredulously. "They're more like small mountains, if you ask me."

Joltik grinned just a bit. "Well, they don't call it Sheltered Vale for nothing, do they?"

"Shh!" Another pokémon in the group, Nidorina, spoke up as she came to a sudden halt; seeing as she had the sharpest ears of the group, everyone immediately stopped, quieted, and looked to her expectantly.

For a few moments, she just stood there, her large ears tilted alertly forward. Then she turned to Braviary and said, "It sounds like there's a battle going on between Deerling and one of the invading pokémon. I think we'd best hurry."

"You heard her, team!" the guildmaster said, though he kept his voice relatively low. "Let's move out and get this mission done."

Most everyone nodded in response and began to move forward, anticipation filling their bodies with energy. Max was the one exception. Though he picked up the pace to match the rest of the group, his every step felt heavy with dread.

At least we'll have the upper hand, right? he consoled himself. *Maybe I won't even have to do anything. We'll surprise them, take out all the leaders, and it'll be over.*

They were getting closer, and now even Max with his relatively bad hearing could detect the shouts of pokémon as they cheered and jeered along with the flow of the battle.

If things are too tough, there's plenty of other guildmembers here to pick up the slack if I'm too useless… But they're also counting on me to do my best! Oh… Everyone's worked up my reputation so much that they're going to be really disappointed…

"What're you doing, Simisear!"

"Knock that deerling senseless already!"

The voices were perfectly clear now. As everyone listened carefully, the group moved more slowly until, finally, they were hidden among the undergrowth at the edge of a beautiful, spacious valley filled with

grasses and flowers that grew as tall as Max himself. As the rest of the group spread out along the edge of the clearing - for both strategic and viewing purposes - Max stepped onto a nearby root in order to see what exactly was going on.

What he saw now was that his giant team had wound up only a couple dozen of his tail-lengths away from where the action was happening. The battle between Simisear and Deerling was taking place right at the shoreline of a lake that took up a good third of the entire valley. Even at his new vantage point, though, Max couldn't see much of what was going on; too many pokémon crowded around the battle, blocking his view. The invaders that Joltik had warned of were stood right along the edges of the battlefield as they hooted and hollered, and behind them were a much larger number of pokémon who, though silent, seemed equally interested in the outcome of the battle.

Max hopped up to a slightly higher root, not fearing being seen since all attention was currently on the battle. As he watched, he saw the deerling take a hit from an ember attack; but, to his amazement, she seemed to shake it off as if it was nothing. Her damp bluish fur didn't even look seared. In fact, it seemed to blend perfectly with the crystal clears waters that she stood in.

Wait… Bluish fur? But deerling-

"That's a cheap trick, using camouflage!" the simisear she was fighting shouted; he seemed rather tired, as if the battle had already been going Deerling's way for a while. "Come out of the water and fight me and take your beating like a real pokémon!"

Deerling, too, looked rather tired, but most of her injuries - some patches of seared and ripped out fur, scrapes, scratches, and the like - appeared to have been accumulated over time, not from this battle. "I'm just using the environment to my advantage," she shouted, though her mockingly sweet voice was barely audible above the boos of the simisear's allies. Deerling had a smile on her face, though Max could tell that the situation was far from a good

one. Though it appeared she might win the battle despite her usual (though not current) type disadvantage, no doubt a victory by her would send the rest of simisear's allies into a rage. Regardless, she kept up her positive attitude and said, "But if you want me to come out of the water, then I suppose I'll go ahead and oblige you."

Faster that Max's eye could quite follow, Deerling sprinted out of the water and slammed into Simisear, causing her camouflage-wetted fur to hiss and steam up as it came into contact with the simisear's own battle-warmed pelt. The simisear was sent flying back with a surprising amount of force, considering the deerling's small size and relatively delicate body.

"Come on, Simisear!"

"Show her what you're made of!"

"You're really going to let a wimp like *her* show you up?"

The goading seemed to get to energize him; he quickly jumped up and shot off a blast of flame at Deerling as she retreated towards the water. She heard the attack coming and nimbly dodged sideways, but the fire burst into pieces upon hitting the surface of the water, filling the air with a strange mix of steam and high-velocity embers. That ember shrapnel caught Deerling off guard and did more damage than it would've had she been prepared. Still, she was a water-type at the moment; all the fire in the world could only do so much.

Using her speed to her advantage, she dashed out of the water again and jumped high into the air, aiming her body so that all four of her hooves would come crashing down onto Simisear; the fire type managed to dodge at the last minute and Deerling hit the ground hard enough that the pain showed on her face. Yet she ignored that and, instead of backing away and giving herself a moment to recover, she kicked out with her rear feet. Simisear, who had only managed to get so far away with his last-second dodge, took the kick full in the side.

He fell to the ground face-up. And this time, he didn't get back up.

A roar of approval came from the back part of the crowd, and Deerling stood a little bit taller as her fur returned to its normal color and the excess water streamed down to the ground in little rivulets. Still, the smile from earlier had faded, and she looked around warily as she watched for any signs of attack from the pokémon that surrounded her.

Her vigilance proved in vain. The cheers of the valley natives died down suddenly as a monferno burst out from where she'd been lurking behind some of her buddies. Before Deerling could react, a powerful mach punch had knocked her down to the ground; in another moment, Monferno's foot was at Deerling's neck, pressing down hard enough that it was clear that she was having difficulty breathing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Max suddenly saw sparks flying from somewhere among the trees. "Why that dirty rotten-"

"Hush, Joltik!" Max heard Braviary interrupt. "We wait for the right moment to strike! If we attack now, Monferno might just kill her before turning to deal with us. Let's wait and see if there's a better moment."

Max was surprised to hear the guildmaster being so level-headed for once. *I guess he wouldn't be guildmaster if all he had was brute strength. But right now, I agree more with Joltik than him. We can't just leave that deerling like that!* Max's fear wasn't gone, but it was battling with his anger and indignation for supremacy. For now, the fear still won out, and he waited for Braviary's signal to attack.

There was a tense silence for a while as monferno pressed down ever harder. It wasn't until Deerling had nearly passed out that Monferno finally let up a bit and, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, said, "You know, Deerling, I thought you had wizened up a bit when you started purposefully throwing the battles. I thought you'd learned your place. What changed?"

Deerling coughed a bit and said something too softly for Max to hear. Whatever it was, it made Monferno's tail flare up with rage. Snarling, she moved her tail and put the still-blazing tip right up to Deerling's fragile ear, causing her to cry out in pain.

"Well, then, I think we've had enough of this little jokester," the Monferno shouted above the deerling's shrill scream. "Right, boys?"

All the other of the other invaders yelled in unison, working themselves into a frenzy of bloodlust. Max unconsciously ruffled his feathers as another wave of anger washed through him, but he still didn't have the guts to jump out and help, especially without Braviary's signal. *Guildmaster, how long until you-*

A giant blur of multicolored feathers suddenly soared out of the trees and straight over the crowd, answering Max's question before he could fully think it. Monferno just barely managed to roll out of the way in time to avoid the grasp of the braviary's heavily muscled talons. Making the best of his miss, Braviary landed next to Deerling and, as Kara jumped off and made her way over to her injured friend, he called out, "All right, guildmembers! Let's show these brutes who's boss!"

Even with his ever-present fear, Max needed no more encouragement to charge forward, pushing through the native pokémon as they fled from the place that was rapidly devolving into a full-fledged battlefield.

Almost immediately, Max lost track of who was fighting who and where. Though the guild pokémon were easily more powerful than the invaders, there were still nearly three times as many of them as there were guildmembers. Max's first instinct was to try to take on the weaker, unevolved pokémon, but none of them fought alone. In each and every case, the basic pokémon teamed up with their evolved counterparts, creating teams of three or four each to match the guild's one or two.

Lacking much other choice in the matter, Max soon found himself fighting alongside Luxio against Ambipom and his aipom followers. He realized very quickly that without Luxio there, he probably would've fled the battle within a minute or two. It was difficult enough to keep up with the three aipom as they darted all around, lashing out with tails and hands; adding the very powerful ambipom to the mix just made things all the worse.

Still, I've got to do my best! he thought to himself as he knocked out one of the aipom with a wing attack.

The little battle didn't last long; Luxio, despite his claims that he was primarily an explorer, was actually an incredible battler. Max took out one of the other aipom with an ancientpower attack in the same amount of time it took Luxio to finish off Ambipom and make the last aipom faint.

Their battle done, Luxio and Max paused, turned to each other, and grinned for a second.

"See? What'd I tell you?" Luxio said. "You're doing great. Four on two ain't easy, even when you team up with someone as great as me."

I'm just glad I didn't freak out and run, Max thought before saying, "Shouldn't we help everyone else out?"

"Already on it!" Luxio said as he turned and dashed towards Rhyhorn, who was having trouble fending off Simisage and his two pansage lackeys. Max started to follow, but Luxio called back to him, "You find someone else who needs help! We need to spread out as much as possible!"

Max came to an abrupt halt and looked around as anxiety started to choke him again. *I was doing so well with Luxio, but I don't even want to think about what will happen if I wind up being the one facing off with one of the evolved pokémon.*

As if fate was anxious to confirm his fears, Max's eyes immediately fell upon Braviary as he took off towards another part of the battle, leaving behind monferno's knocked-out form. But as Max looked back down at the monferno, he saw her get up and brush herself off, injured but far from fainting. With dread, he saw Monferno look around the chaos of the battle before locking eyes on Deerling and Joltik at the edge of the lake.

Max watched for a moment as Monferno began to creep past the many individual battles, staying low so as to avoid detection amidst the chaos. There could be no doubt about her target. And - strong thought Joltik seemed to think her friend to be - Deerling was still collapsed on the ground, barely conscious. Unless Joltik was secretly an amazing battler, Max knew that the two were in deep trouble.

The archen hesitated for a moment, vacillating between his fear and his desire to protect the two girls; in the end, his protective instincts won out, and he dashed through the crowd, his swift legs and small body carrying him under the notice of the other battlers.

Monferno looked up too late to see the incoming quick attack, and soon the two were tumbling towards the shore in a heap. Archen was the first to extricate himself from his opponent and, as soon as he'd recovered his footing, he tried to attack again, this time giving his ancientpower attack a shot.

The fire-type was too quick for him, though. A low kick knocked Max's legs from beneath him, disrupting the concentration that he needed for the attack. Monferno followed up swiftly with an ember attack.

But when it came to retreating, Max was a master. He rolled out of the way of the fire attack and ran a distance off before wheeling around to face the monferno, his knobby knees literally knocking together in fear. In that short flurry of attacks, he'd already seen that he was way out of his league.

"You want to protect the troublemakers, huh?" the monferno asked, her tail flaming all the brighter. She seemed barely injured from her battle with Braviary; no doubt she'd planned on throwing that battle as soon as she'd seen Braviary's power. "Then I'll kill you as a warm up for what I'll do when I get to the joltik and the deerling. They're the ones who've caused all this trouble."

"You'll have to deal with the both of us, then!"

Max felt his heart leap to his throat at the sudden voice that came from his side; he looked over and saw Joltik next to him, with sparks the size of her entire body leaping from her static-charged fur.

We're still in deep trouble, even two-on-one, Max thought, but he tried to bite back his doubts. *Maybe… Just maybe…*

While he was thinking, Monferno was preparing for her next attack. The fire from her tail suddenly flared up dramatically, enveloping her entire body as it swirled forward, lending her momentum in a charge.

Max went to his default plan: he dodged. Joltik, on the other hand, shot out a web of electrified threads in an attempt at stopping Monferno's momentum. But the threads burned to nothing in the face of the flame wheel, and Max winced as he saw the tiny pokémon get knocked backwards, her fur smoking.

I've gotta do this! Max took a deep breath and charged forward again, this time with his wings outstretched. He managed to land a wing attack on the monferno as her flames died down. She took some damage, but endured the pain and quickly retaliated with a mach punch that hit Max straight in the beak. Though by far not the least protected part of his body, the blow jarred his skull and sent him tumbling to the ground.

He was still on the ground trying to reclaim his wits when he saw Monferno charging towards him, her fist drenched with flame. He pushed himself hurriedly off the ground, but his bearings were still off and he immediately tripped and fell down again.

Not knowing what else to do, he braced himself for the finishing blow.

There was a flash of light as very strongly charged web shot through the air, this time successfully ensnaring Monferno - at least, for as long as the web could hold up against her flaming hand as she tore at the strands.

But Max didn't need long. His sense of balance was returning quickly. He got up and ran back over to Joltik's side, reaching her just as Monferno finished ripping off the web.

The fire-type glared at them, her eyes murderous. "You both are going to die," she said slowly as the flame on her tail once again grew, spreading down the tail and then across the surface of her body until she was once again surrounded by a wheel of fire.

"I'm not letting you touch Deerling!" Kara said, digging her tiny feet into the ground as she braced herself.

Max frantically looked from Monferno to Joltik, then looked back once again at the blazing fireball of a pokémon as the monferno's rage fed the flames, goading them every larger. Max saw that both he and joltik had already taken heavy damage; Monferno, meanwhile, seemed only somewhat tired.

For a few moments, Max just stood in place, his fear once again completely overtaking him and crushing what little will he'd had to fight in the first place.

It was only when the flame wheel rolled forward that his paralysis of fear ended. Without thinking, he grabbed Joltik's fur in his beak at the last moment and ran. And he kept on running until there was a safe distance between them and the enraged - but no longer fire-coated - monferno.

"What are you doing!" Joltik said as she squirmed, her sparks sending jolts of pain through Max's beak. "We've gotta go fight!"

"But we're completely outclassed!" he said as best he could, considering that he was still holding the electric-type in his beak. "Nothing will change if we both die!"

As joltik continued to protest, Monferno looked at them for a few long moments. Then, a sneer came to her face, and in a low shout she said, "You two just stay over there like the wimps you are, and I'll leave you alone. It's the deerling who I've got the real problem with."

Joltik's sparking increased into a full-out electric storm as monferno turned and headed steadily towards the deerling who, despite her best efforts, could not even get to her hooves and run away.

"Let me go!" Joltik protested. "We can't just let her die!"

Max did his best to keep his grip on the tiny bug, hating himself all the while. *I want to be able to do something, just like you! But… but…* His wings trembled as he even thought about fighting the monferno again. She could and would kill him, of that he had no doubt. But that knowledge didn't change the fact that it was his duty to stand up to Monferno, not just because he was a member of the Southern Guild, but because he had to make up for his past mistakes.

That's why I'm here in this world, and yet…

He looked around desperately, but all the other guild pokémon were otherwise engaged. He watched rhyhorn fall in one battle and saw nidorina redouble her clawing to make up for his loss; in another battle, vibrava let out a blast of blue dragonbreath that surged through the air with an energy that was neither wholly of air nor wholly of fire.

If only I had something like that dragonbreath attack! Max thought. *If I could attack from a distance, then-*

"Let me GO!" Joltik said, though her burns were finally catching up with her. Her sparking was losing its intensity, but she nonetheless

continued to fight against Max. "You're supposed to be a guildmember! DO something! At least let me go so *I* can do something!"

But I can't let both you and Deerling die! And I'm not going to let myself die, either! he thought desperately. *Come on… There's got to be something I can do. Something! Anything!*

Max was at the height of his desperation when an intensely bright light suddenly blinded him, and he dropped Joltik in his pain and surprise.

"Deerling!" Max heard Joltik shout as she hit the ground and started moving forward. "I'm coming!"

Squinting against the persistent light, Max looked up and watched with shock as Joltik scurried across the trampled blades of grass. But she wasn't the Joltik he had been holding back just a second ago. The blinding light was coming from her, giving her an almost ethereal quality. Every hair on her body was glowing with a light so bright that the rest of the flurry of battles were thrown into darkness in comparison.

Still, despite the light she shed on the valley, the other battles raged on uninterrupted, leaving Max as the sole witness of something that - to the best of his knowledge - had not happened in this world for nearly a decade.

Joltik was evolving.

Joltik's scurrying turned to running as her legs extended and her body grew in a process that seemed both slow and lightning-quick at the same time. Her body segmented, and the hair on her abdomen and legs spiked out, charged with the sudden boost of electricity that flooded through her.

Monferno turned just as the transformation was ending, when the light was still bright enough to blind her. And that moment of

blindness was all Joltik - or, rather, Galvantula - needed in order to make her move. As the light faded and the blue and yellow of her new body came into view, she spat out an electroweb so charged with electricity that, for a moment, Max thought that its light was some remnant of the evolution. The mass of the webbing was enough to completely wrap around the stunned monferno, binding her more effectively than any of her earlier electroweb attacks. And, more importantly, the electricity that flowed through the sticky strands of this web was enough to leave Monferno heavily damaged.

Before Monferno could recover and burn the webbing off of her, the galvantula was upon her. Monferno didn't even have a chance; one well-placed slash of the claw on one of Joltik's feet was enough to knock her out, this time for real.

One by one, all the battles in the valley meadow came to a stop. Determined though all of Monferno's gang had been to continue their battles even during the remarkable evolution, they had continued to keep an eye on the situation of Monferno's battle as best they could; and now, with their leader gone, their will to fight left them.

Tense seconds passed as guildmembers looked to invaders and invaders looked to guildmembers, no one brave enough to make the next move.

Finally, there was a flash of movement as one of the gang members at the edge of the impromptu battlefield suddenly fled. In another second, all the others - evolved leaders and unevolved lackeys alike - had turned tail, unhesitatingly abandoning those who had already fallen.

The exhausted guildmembers readied themselves for pursuit, but a flurry of commotion rendered that part of their job unnecessary. Just as the gang reached the treeline, an enormous mix of ranged attacks suddenly hit them, knocking out the foremost pokémon immediately. Those who remained conscious - mostly the smaller, slower unevolved pokémon - retreated a ways away, holding their hands in the air in capitulation.

The native pokémon who remained hidden among the trees either didn't notice or didn't care about their surrender; another blast of attacks later, and every single one of the rest of them was knocked out.

A cheer went up from someone in the forest, and suddenly the entire valley - guildmembers included - erupted into a roar of victory shouts. The valley's native pokémon quickly emerged from the trees around and came to meet their saviors, whatever unreasoning pride they had once possessed apparently gone in the moment of triumph.

Max paid little attention to them; he felt his responsibility was still with Galvantula and Deerling, both of whom he had failed to protect. The archen darted beneath his fellow guildmembers - most of whom were much larger than he was - and eventually found himself just a couple feet behind Galvantula as she helped Deerling to her feet.

"Deerling, are you okay?" the electric-type asked, concern apparent in her voice.

Deerling coughed a little and smiled as she shakily got her hooves beneath her. "Kara, I keep on telling you to call me Emma," she said hoarsely. Max winced as he noticed that he could see the deerling's thin neck swelling with bruising, making it difficult even now for her to catch her breath after being nearly choked to death earlier. And when his eyes inevitably fell upon Deerling's face, he had to look away. Nearly half of her left ear was gone, and that entire side of her face was badly singed, to the point that Max wondered if the fur there could ever grow back normally.

"Fine then!" Galvantula replied. "Emma, Deerling, whatever! Just tell me that you're all right!"

Deerling nodded her head slowly. "I think I'll be okay," she rasped out, though her entire body was trembling. Then, with a weak smile, she said, "That was quite the battle, you know. Congratulations on evolving."

I should go apologize for being so useless… Max thought. *But I really shouldn't interrupt them. Looks like they're just happy that everything turned out okay.*

"I was really impressed, too!" Guildmaster Braviary called out loudly as he flapped over to Galvantula and Deerling, interrupted what otherwise might have been a touching moment. "Evolving like that in the middle of battle? Crazy!" Braviary said. "You have some sort of trick? Know something that we all don't know? Something that could explain why no one's been able to evolve for so many years?" Though the guildmaster sounded like his usual loud, talkative self, Max thought he heard an urgency in his words, as if these rapid-fire questions were more important than he tried to make them sound.

Galvantula shook her head. "I don't know how it happened. I just really wanted to help Deerling-"

"Emma," the deerling interrupted, her voice a little stronger than before. "How many times must I tell you?"

The fur on the galvantula's body suddenly relaxed somewhat, in the galvantula version of a sigh. "Okay, as I was saying, I just wanted to help *Emma* and all of a sudden it happened. I don't have a clue how."

"Hah! Well, good for you!" Braviary said, seemingly unperturbed by the unhelpful answer. "And on a more serious note, I've gotta admit that I messed up big time! I thought Monferno was knocked out when I left her. Instead, looks like she caused more trouble for you. Sorry 'bout that, really I am."

"At least you *tried* to help, unlike *some* pokémon," she said as she cast a glare over Max's direction.

The archen looked down to the ground. "I-I'm sorry," he said, terribly conscious of the eyes of all the guildmembers and valley natives who stood immediately around them, listening in to the conversation.

"I just… Monferno, she was just too strong. As we were, neither of us could've done anything more."

"But you just gave up!" Galvantuala accused as she advanced towards Max, making him terribly conscious that the size difference between them had been roughly reversed. "We had to keep-"

"Don't be too hard on him!" Guildmaster Braviary said with a smile as he flapped his brightly colored wings. "After all, he stepped in to help you in the first place! And don't you be too hard on yourself, either," Braviary said, slapping a wing against the archen's back amiably. "It's my fault if I overestimated your abilities too much. You told me not to bring you - guess I need to shut my beak every once in a while and listen! And you're new to the guild, after all. You've got plenty of time to grow stronger."

Galvantula shot Max one last piercing glare before returning to Deerling's side.

Then the conversation shifted to playful bragging of moments within the battle, but Max wanted no part in that; he moved off to the back of the crowd, too depressed to enjoy the good mood in the air. After all, he'd just been proven to be a coward in front of some of the strongest members of the guild. *No doubt they'll all never talk to me again… Everyone at the guild will hear about it, and they'll hate me, and-*

"Hey, Max. Nice effort out there."

Max looked over and saw rhyhorn resting on the ground, too injured to move around but once again conscious.

"But-"

"I screwed up my first ever important mission, too," Rhyhorn said. "It ain't no one's fault. It happens. I'm impressed that you even had the guts to stand up to that monferno in the first place, especially without

any backup. Even with my rock attacks, I don't think I'd have wanted to face her alone."

There was a buzzing, and Max looked up to see Vibrava alight on the top of Rhyhorn's body. "If you ever want to train, come and find me," she said with an encouraging smile, not even bringing up the topic that she must've known was on Max's mind. "I've heard a rumor that archen can learn dragonbreath, you know. And I'd bet you'd be a quick learner if it's true."

"But-"

Vibrava interrupted him by buzzing her wings a bit without taking off, then said, "Quit with the buts already! You're trying to make this all into a bigger deal than it is. Whether or not you've noticed, the pokémon at the guild became interested in you because of your reputation, but stayed interested because they like you. Something like this isn't going to change that."

Max relaxed a little bit and let a smile come to his beak. Whether she knew it or not, Vibrava had addressed half of what was really bothering him. After getting to know everyone at the guild, Max didn't want to lose any of the new friends he had made. The dragon-type's words were a huge weight off of the archen's chest.

"Thanks," Max said sincerely.

The vibrava smiled again. "Any time," she said. "And I mean it about the whole dragonbreath thing. Just find me sometime and I'll help you get started."

"Sure thing," Max said before turning and walking off, staying along the back of the cluster of guildmembers as his worries returned.

Unfortunately for him, no amount of kind words could soothe the other half of his unhappiness. When it had really mattered, Max had proven himself a coward once again. And even if everything had

turned out all right in the end, he still couldn't forgive himself for that much.

As if to validate his feelings, he suddenly felt as if someone's eyes were boring into him, and he looked up to see Luxio's piercing yellow eyes glaring at him from some distance away. As soon as their gazes met, Luxio's eyes narrowed. Then he shook his head slowly, turned his back on Max, and went to join a more distant group of celebrating guildmembers.

All of the shame from before Vibrava's pep talk flooded back into Max.

Maybe most of the guild won't mind that I'm a coward, like Vibrava said, but now the first guildmember I ever spoke with won't even look at me. I think I'd almost prefer him to stay friends with me and have everyone else against me… He's been so nice over the last couple weeks.

The archen suddenly flopped forward onto his stomach, letting his head and beak fall heavily against the soft, grass-covered ground.

Barely opening his beak, he let out a sigh.

"I'm the worst."

I should be catching up on sleep. Know what I'm doing instead? Finishing writing this chapter, editing it, and posting it. But it's on time still! ^_^ Anyway, a couple of things:

1. I just posted a poll! Just curious to see who your favorite character is so far. Drop by my profile and check it out if you want to indulge my curiousity!

2. I actually just started another pokémon 'fic' - it's a collection of flash fiction that I'm doing for my college's writing club's "Flash Fiction February" challenge. Go to my profile or see the story itself

for details. Essentially, it'll just be a bunch of insanely short one-shots.

3. If you know of any really good PMD fics, could you message me and tell me what they are or who the author is? I'd love to read some (once I get the time), but I'm always too lazy to seek out the good ones for myself.

4. Camouflage is probably one of the most useful moves. Ever. Just sayin'.

5. There's probably more that I want to say that I'm forgetting, but whatever. (start rant) I just got a job and I'm taking 17 credit hours this semester and I'm low on sleep and I have to wake up in about six hours and I'm taking two big tests tomorrow, so I no longer care (end rant). I'm just glad I managed to finish this chapter in time. ^_^

Thanks for reading! Now that we've got through two full chapters for each chapter, I'd love to hear what your thinking about the story overall (in addition to whatever you might think about this particular chapter, of course). Thanks for all the reviews so far, and I hope you continue to enjoy the fic! (Assuming that you're enjoying it as of now, that is…)

Team Rebirth

Chapter Seven: Team Rebirth

"Hey, Vulpix."

Vulpix instinctually flinched and quickly turned around, surprised by Charmeleon's voice. Of course, she probably shouldn't have been so shocked. She was looking at the mission board, which was hardly a private place; Charmeleon had as much right to be here as she did.

Still, old habits die hard.

"Yes?" she asked quietly, not sure what to expect. In the weeks since their group mission, Charmeleon had more or less avoided contact with Team Rebirth. Though an improvement over his previous actions, this didn't exactly lead Vulpix to trust him. Especially not when she was being forced to talk to him alone; Bulbasaur was still finishing up his morning training in another part of the guild.

"Zebstrika wanted you to take a look at the mission in the top right up there," he grumbled, as if he was just as reluctant to speak with Vulpix as she was to talk to him.

Hesitantly, Vulpix looked up, expecting some sort of trick as soon as she turned away. However, she found herself uninterrupted as she located the job and read its description.

"Charred Forest?" she asked as she looked back to Charmeleon. "Isn't that Bulbasaur's home? Emerald Forest?"

"Zebstrika thought that Bulbasaur's knowledge of the area would help," Charmeleon said. "But he said you two didn't-"

"Charmeleon, are you picking on Vulpix again?"

Both Vulpix and Charmeleon turned to see Bulbasaur running over, his face outraged.

Charmeleon grinned, let out a puff of smoke, and said, "Looks like *someone's* a bit over-protective." Then, turning back to Vulpix, he said, "As I was saying, Zebstrika said that you don't have to take the mission. But you can if you want. Anyway, see you later, losers."

Bulbasaur stuck out his tongue at Charmeleon as he left the room. "What a jerk!" Bulbasaur said as he turned back to Vulpix. "Are you okay? Sheesh, I thought he was done messing with us!"

Vulpix smiled. "I'm fine. But, um… Charmeleon said that Zebstrika wanted us to do that mission up there, if we could."

"Huh?" Bulbasaur looked up. Concerned, Vulpix watched him as his expression paled, becoming grimmer with each word he read.

If his parents really died in that fire, then going back to that forest would mean more than going back to just a lost home. He'd be going back to his parents' graves… Her ears drooped to the side of her head. *I should've taken the notice down before he could even see it. He shouldn't have to make this decision. I-*

"Well, I don't see why we shouldn't take it," Bulbasaur said with a sigh, interrupting Vulpix's thoughts. "I do know the old crone Venomoth, and if she's saying she knows the cause of the fire, then she probably does. I thought it was just the lightning storm, but maybe not."

"Are you sure you want to go?"

Bulbasaur smiled. "Sure I'm sure. It won't be a problem. Besides, Venomoth never speaks to outsiders. If anyone else takes the mission, they probably wouldn't get a word of sense out of her. I mean, she's known me my entire life and I still might only get a word or two out of her about what happened. She's kinda nuts. But it seems like any easy enough mission."

Vulpix looked down to the ground. She could see that Bulbasaur was forcing his smile, but she didn't know what to do about it. Talk to him? Bring up his parents, instead of being so cowardly as to avoid the topic as she had been doing all this time? Or should she insist that they take another mission?

What would the original me have done?

To this and all her questions, her mind had no answer. "All right, Bulbasaur," she said. "If you're sure…"

Though Bulbasaur managed to keep up his cheery façade on the trek to their destination, his demeanor changed as they began to wade through the grey cinders and blackened trunks. Even now, weeks after the fire, no life could be seen. The landscape was barren and deserted; it was almost as if the ashes that had settled atop the landscape and that now were coating Team Rebirth were also choking out all life that tried to recover.

Choking out all life, Vulpix thought. *Including Bulbasaur's. He said he's okay with this, but he's barely even said a word since we got here…*

Though Vulpix rarely started any conversation, she thought it best to try to get Bulbasaur's mind off of what was troubling him. "So, about this Venomoth…"

"Huh?" Bulbasaur said, snapping out of his thoughts. "Oh, yeah. You'd probably best let me do the talking. As I said, she doesn't speak with outsiders."

"But will she actually still be here? I mean… No one else is around. Don't you think she might've moved on to another forest?"

"She'll be here," Bulbasaur said. "Even if the mission description hadn't said that she was ranting about the fire here, I'd bet that she's here. I can't imagine her ever being anywhere else."

They lapsed back into silence for a time. The topic of the mission being exhausted, Vulpix really had no idea what to say. Normally Bulbasaur led the flow of their conversations, while she only commented now and again when she didn't understand something or she thought something was interesting. Now that she needed to be the one speaking, she just didn't know what to do.

"Um… Did you hear about that big mission the Southern Guild did?" she finally asked, recalling something that Fi the abra had told her.

There was a second's pause before Bulbasaur seemed to hear her. "What?" he asked uncomprehendingly.

"The mission the Southern Guild did," Vulpix said. "I guess that they chased out a huge bunch of pokémon from some valley. And someone evolved, too. That's neat… right?"

A weak but genuine smile spread across Bulbasaur's face. "I'm sorry. I'm worrying you, aren't I?" he said as he continued to trudge through the ashes of his old home.

Vulpix opened her mouth to deny it, but stopped herself and instead just looked at Bulbasaur, her eyes sad. "Yeah, a little," she admitted. "If you, um… If you want to talk about something, then, uh… You can talk with me. If you want."

Bulbasaur turned his head forward again and, for a moment, put all his attention into stepping over a blackened branch.

With a sigh, Vulpix looked back to the ground. *I guess if I can't even trust him with the fact that I'm human, I don't deserve his trust,* she thought. *Still, I wish there was something I could do. I wish-*

"To be honest, I haven't been telling you everything, Vulpix," Bulbasaur suddenly spoke up. Vulpix looked over at him in hopeful surprise, but he kept his eyes trained directly forward. "The night of the fire… I was terrified. Flames were leaping up all around me. I couldn't breathe well, I couldn't see well, and everything hurt. I'm

sure you remember seeing the burns on my body when we first met… They've healed mostly now, but they hurt terribly.

"I was trying to stay close to my parents. I'd never left Emerald Forest in my life, and so I still relied on them a lot, even though I was to the point where I didn't need to. I guess I might've continued to rely on them because *everyone* in the forest relied on them, to an extent. They were a pair of venusaur, each by far stronger than anyone else in the forest. It was hard not to look up to them. If anyone had problems, they were the ones to go to. Anyway…"

Bulbasaur paused, took a breath, and then continued in a stronger voice. "I was following my parents. I was able to keep up, mostly because pokémon as big and bulky as venusaur aren't all that fast. But… You see, they only had certain paths through the forest that they could travel. Anywhere that they hadn't already cleared, the trees grew too thickly for them to make it through. They were trapped by their own home. They tried to get me to make a run for it, but I wouldn't go."

His voice quavered now, and Vulpix could see tears in his eyes. She could feel tears in her own eyes as well, but how much of that was due to sentimentality and how much was due to kicked up ash was hard to say.

"Eventually, we came across some guild pokémon who were trying to fight the fire and trying to help evacuate pokémon to the nearest area of safety. I still wouldn't go. Then… I think my mom knocked me out. She must've handed me over to one of the guild pokémon. Next thing I knew, I was watching the blaze recede behind me as Zebstrika carried me to the guild. I tried to go back, but he wouldn't let me. And my parents… They're dead. I knew that they couldn't make it out, and another guild member confirmed it later. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you sooner."

Vulpix walked a little closer so that their sides rubbed as they walked. "I already knew."

Bulbasaur broke the contact and finally turned his head to look at her. "What?"

"The day of the mission in Tallgrass Plains, when Charmeleon got me all alone," Vulpix explained. "He said that your parents were dead. I wasn't sure whether to believe him or not… But after a while, I figured that had to be the case."

"You must hate me for not telling you for so long."

"Hate you?" Vulpix said, surprised. "How could I hate you for that? I'm… I'm just sorry that I didn't ask you about it. You've been trying to be so cheery for me these last few weeks, but you had something like this that you secretly had to bear… But I was too afraid to bring it up."

"To be honest, I'm glad you didn't," Bulbasaur said. Though he still had tears in his eyes, there was also a friendly - albeit weak - smile on his face. "I would've hated myself if I hadn't been the one to bring it up. After all, we're a team, aren't we? We're supposed to trust each other with this sort of stuff. I should've told you sooner."

Vulpix looked to the ground, suddenly feeling awkward. *So you've told me this, but now I've got a secret that I haven't told… Should I tell you?*

Seeing her sudden distress, Bulbasaur said, "You know, you can confide anything in me. Something's been troubling you, too, hasn't it? You always say that it's nothing when I ask you, but I don't believe it. Your mind is always drifting off to worry about something."

"It's nothing, really," Vulpix said out of instinct.

"You see, there you go again," Bulbasaur said. "I mean, if you really don't want to tell me, that's okay. I won't force you. But as I said, we're a team. You can count on me if you want to get something off your chest."

Vulpix went into a sudden coughing fit as she inhaled a swirl of ashes; only when the coughing subsided did she catch her breath, and it wasn't until for a few more moments that she finally responded to Bulbasaur.

"Well…" *But I can't tell him that I'm a human! He'll think I'm crazy!* "It's just the whole not having a memory thing. It bothers me. I'm still never sure how to act." It wasn't a complete lie; though in truth, she had been starting to get over that part of her situation. It was the human part that still bothered her, and it was that part that she knew she had to hide from Bulbasaur.

"Personally, I think there's something nice about not having your memory and all," Bulbasaur said, unaware of the masking of the truth. "Don't get me wrong, I still hope you can remember who you are eventually… But think about it: you can choose who you want to be. And even if you can't see it, you've still got your own personality. You're still you. And I still like you for who you are. And I bet I'll still like you for who you are, once we figure out who you really are. Does that make you feel any better?"

Vulpix smiled, despite the fact that her secret still weighed on her mind. "Yeah, it does."

"Glad to hear it," he said, smiling for real for the first time since arriving in Charred Forest.

"And you're sure you're okay about your parents and all?" Vulpix asked. "If you need, we can talk more-"

"I'm fine, I think," Bulbasaur interrupted. "Still sad, but… Well, I've come to terms with it. Besides, the fire wasn't all bad. I wouldn't have met you if it hadn't forced me to leave. Mainly, I just don't want to let it hold me back. We're Team Rebirth, right? This is a new life for me. I'll continue remembering the old, but it's the past now."

Grim though the source of his optimism may have been, he sincerely meant his words, for which Vulpix was glad. It was nice to see him

acting normal again, especially when their surroundings were so disheartening.

"Well, anyway, Venomoth ought to be around here somewhere. This is the part of the forest where she lived," Bulbasaur said. "Hey! Venomoth! You here!"

There was no response as the pair continued to walk through the ashen wasteland.

Bulbasaur waited a few minutes before calling out again.

Again, there was no response.

"You're sure she's still here?" Vulpix asked.

"Positive," Bulbasaur replied.

Hmm… Vulpix paused momentarily and brought her paw up to try to get the ashes out of her eyes. She quickly stopped herself as soon as she saw how grey her own paws were. More annoyed than ever by the sting in her eyes, she nonetheless left it alone as she caught back up with Bulbasaur and started looking around again.

Perhaps it was just because she was being more diligent in order to keep her mind off of her ash, but she soon managed to spot something moving in the distance.

"Um, Bulbasaur?" she said, pointing towards it with her paw.

Bulbasaur looked where she was pointing and smiled. "That's got to be her! Come on!"

The two now rushed forward, moving closer and closer until Vulpix could finally get a good look at the lavender bug with its delicate but powerful wings that constantly whipped up the ashes beneath it into little whirlwinds.

The venomoth didn't see them until they were very close, at which point she immediately started flying away.

"Wait, Venomoth! It's me, Bulbasaur!"

Venomoth stopped, turned, and slowly flew back over to Bulbasaur and Vulpix. And, in a voice that was little more than a murmur, she said, "Bulbasaur is here, he is, he is. Venomoth didn't think that anyone was here anymore."

Though she seemed to be speaking to herself, Bulbasaur was unperturbed. "I've been gone until now. But I came back to ask you some questions. Do you mind?"

"Questions, he says? What kind of questions, Venomoth wonders? Twin trees grow amidst the soot, the pokémon travels foot by foot, through land of snow and land of-"

"I was wondering," Bulbasaur interrupted her ramblings, "if you knew what caused the fire that burned down our home."

"Home is the place the Spirit chooses to reside," Venomoth said. "And the Spirit chooses randomly, without purpose. But purpose is purposeless. It creates what it…"

While Venomoth continued to ramble, Bulbasaur leaned over to Vulpix and said, "Venomoth gets like this sometimes. Just give me a second."

Bulbasaur cleared his throat and once again interrupted Venomoth. "What is it that Venomoth thinks happened to Emerald Forest? What gave life to the flames?"

"Oh, Venomoth doesn't *think* it. She knows it. She saw it with her own eyes," she said, finally paying attention to the question. "Lightning rained down from the sky. Venomoth nearly died, but she saw. She saw the lightning, and she saw he who made it."

"And who is it that made the lightning?" Bulbasaur urged.

"When he of blue in cloud doth dwell, thunder in the sky doth swell. Listen when that thunder sounds, for death by lightning strikes the ground. Yet he doth moderate the blows, and warn the pokémon below. Thus balance reign between land and storm, and peace reigneth forevermore."

Vulpix thought that Venomoth was simply spouting more nonsense, but Bulbasaur scowled as if in deep thought. "That's the old nursery rhyme about Thundurus," he said to Venomoth. "You're not saying he did it, are you? He's just a myth. No one in living memory has seen him. That's why the guilds exist, so that they can make up for the chaos the elements produce."

"It is he and he alone who Venomoth saw in the sky that day, directing the clouds their ways to go and guiding the bolts to the forest," Venomoth said as she fluttered a little lower to the ground, kicking up more ashes into Bulbasaur's and Vulpix's faces. "His eyes were cold, and his spirit was made of ice. The lightning was frozen, chilled. It was only when he left that Venomoth felt the heat of the fire."

Venomoth suddenly fluttered over to a nearby tree trunk, expecting the charred remains intently.

Vulpix looked over to Bulbasaur, confused. "Who's Thundurus?"

"An old legend," Bulbasaur replied, half to himself. "He supposedly controls lightning. He can't stop storms from happening, but he was supposed to warn pokémon when a storm was coming as well as moderate the damage. I mean, everything about what Venomoth is saying is wrong. Even if he *does* exist, he would never purposefully destroy a forest. Especially not if there were pokémon in harm's way."

"Well, Venomoth does seem kind of crazy…" Vulpix said, more than a little creeped out by the odd pokémon. "She probably just made it

up."

"But that's just it. She might start saying nonsensical stuff, but when she *does* answer a question, she gets the facts right. Until now, at least. Maybe the stress of the fire finally pushed her over the edge."

Venomoth turned back toward the pair and appeared ready to say something to Bulbasaur; however, her eyes suddenly fell upon Vulpix, and in another moment Vulpix's body was filled with pain as some invisible force seized every inch of her and threw her backwards. She hit a charred trunk, which partly crumbled as Vulpix hit it, perhaps saving her major injury by softening the blow.

In another moment, Venomoth had flown up next to Vulpix again. With a crazed look in her eye, she shot off a beam of multicolored energy towards the dazed vulpix, hitting her with such force that a small crater formed around Vulpix's body as she was slammed into the ashen ground.

"Venomoth, what are you doing?" Bulbasaur said as he finally recovered his wits, extended his vines, and wrapped them around the lavender pokémon's body and wings. Encumbered in such a way, Venomoth tumbled to the ground.

Vulpix struggled to her feet, injured enough that she would've stayed lying down if she hadn't minded worrying Bulbasaur. However, she had no broken bones as far as she could tell.

"Vulpix! Are you all right?" Bulbasaur said as he ran over to her, though he continued to hold Venomoth at vine's length.

Vulpix nodded. "I'll be okay. But why did-"

"The Cold One!" Venomoth suddenly wailed. She did not struggle against Bulbasaur's vines, but instead looked straight ahead as she remained completely still, her eyes filled with a far-away look. "She bears the mark of the Cold One!"

Vulpix frowned as she limped closer to Bulbasaur; it felt like she'd sprained one of her paws in her fall. "Cold one?" she asked, suddenly acutely aware of the cold radiating from her chest. "Does she mean the nevermeltice?"

"Destroy it!" Venomoth shouted as she began to struggle again. "She cannot be allowed to live! The Cold One! No!"

"Venomoth, calm down!" Bulbasaur said, struggling to keep his grip. "You can't just attack pokémon! This isn't like you! There is no 'cold one' here - just me and my friend!"

Vulpix backed away a bit, wishing she could sink into the ashes.

She'd just been starting to accept her amnesia. But how was she supposed to react to this? *If Venomoth's not just being crazy, then what was I before now that was so bad that she'd freak out like this?*

"The Cold One cannot be allowed to exist!" Venomoth continued to shout. "The balance has failed. It must be stopped!"

Bulbasaur looked over to Vulpix sadly. "I think you'd better back off until she can't see you," he said apologetically. "I'll follow you once she's calmed down."

Vulpix nodded and limped back the way they had come, following the trench they had created in the ashes. As she did, her thoughts fell further and further into turmoil.

Cold one? Just what did she mean by that? An ice-type, maybe? That must be it. Maybe the nevermeltice just reminded her of a bad ice-type or something. I'm obviously not any sort of cold one… I'm a fire type.

… but Bulbasaur said that she normally got her facts right. Well, except for when she's ranting. Did that qualify as a rant? It wasn't like the ranting from before. And Bulbasaur acted like she didn't

normally attack other pokémon like that. So what was so bad about me - or my nevermeltice - that made her attack me so viciously?

Vulpix was far enough away now. She stopped, sat down, and tried to get her paw beneath the cord that the pendant dangled from. As always, it was flush against her neck. Even Bulbasaur's vines hadn't been thin enough to grab onto it. Golem's claws had managed it, but no matter how hard he had pulled, the almost infinitesimally thin cord hadn't broken. She didn't know what it was made of, though Bulbasaur had said that it looked like the same ice as the pendant itself, just in a different form.

Where did it come from? Was it something I had as a human? Or maybe I've been a vulpix for longer than I've had amnesia, and I got it back before I lost my memories but after I was already a pokémon… If so, what did I do here that would upset Venomoth like that?

"Vulpix? Are you okay?"

Vulpix had barely seen Bulbasaur approach her, even though she'd been looking straight towards him this entire time.

She looked down at the ground. "Bulbasaur… What do you think I was like? Before I lost my memories?"

Bulbasaur cocked his head to one side, deep in thought. "Well, I think you must've been a lot like you are now. Somehow, it just doesn't make sense for all of who you are to be based on memories alone. There's got to be something more to it. Your spirit has got to be the same as always."

"So do you think I'm a bad pokémon?"

"What? No! Of course not!" Bulbasaur insisted, moving closer so that she was forced to look him in the eyes. "You're one of the nicest pokémon I've ever known! You wouldn't hurt a fly!"

"Then why am I so good at battling?" This was a question that had been bothering her recently. Charmeleon had implied on multiple occasions that it'd taken him years to even get down the basics of a flamethrower attack. *How is it that I have it nearly mastered already, if I don't already have a lot of unconscious experience?*

Bulbasaur shrugged. "I know a lot of pokémon who are good at battling but aren't mean. I like to think that I'm sorta like that. Personally, I just think you've got a natural talent for battling. It doesn't make you a mean or violent pokémon by any means."

Vulpix wanted to take his words to heart, but couldn't. There were just too many unanswered questions that Bulbasaur's explanation didn't quite answer.

"Come on, Vulpix, don't be like this," he said encouragingly. "Venomoth's always been crazier than a goldeen who's afraid of water. Obviously the fire just made her go *way* crazier than before."

Vulpix averted her eyes from his. She was glad for his confidence in her, but she didn't share it.

Bulbasaur looked at her for a few moments, then grabbed one of her paws in his vine and started pulling, walking off in a direction completely different from where they'd been. "There's something I want to go see, Vulpix, and I think it might get your mind off things. Let's go."

Vulpix didn't protest as she followed her partner. If anything, her curiosity at Bulbasaur's purposeful vagueness managed to get her mind off her trouble more effectively than any of his counseling.

There was nothing left here, after all. What could he possibly hope to show her?

What if he's excited to show me this, only to be disappointed when it turns out that it burned down with everything else? she thought

grimly, worried about Bulbasaur. *He says that he's come to terms with the fire and his parents' deaths, but really…*

They walked on in silence until Bulbasaur whispered something triumphantly to himself, causing Vulpix to look ahead. In the distance, she saw something that was tall like the shells of the deceased trees they wove among. Yet she instantly saw that this was different. It was thicker than the other trees, and though not taller than many of them, it seemed much more solid, as if the fires had failed to so much as touch it.

As the duo came closer, Vulpix saw that it was not one thing, but rather two that sprouted from the barren ground side by side, eventually twining together and continuing upward as one. Vulpix supposed they were trees, but they were trees unlike any that she had ever seen. Their bark was made of scale-like sections taller than Vulpix herself that circled the trunk. Branches with massive leaves poked out here and there from the trunks, though for the most part they were bare.

But the oddest parts of trees were by far the pink, petal-like leaves that grew out from the top, making the trees seem not like trees, but rather like giant flowers that so yearned for the sky that they couldn't be held back by the ashes that choked all other life from returning to the forest.

It wasn't until the pair of pokémon had stopped and Vulpix had gazed at the trees for a while that Bulbasaur finally spoke up.

"I knew they'd come here."

"What?" Vulpix asked, confused.

Bulbasaur gestured with a vine to the two massive mounds of earthy ash that the trees sprouted from, and Vulpix noted that for the first time since arriving in Charred Forest, there was life. It wasn't just the trees. Growing from the two mounds, ferns and flowers and new trees sprouted in a myriad of different colors, shapes, and sizes,

almost as if the entire forest was trying to make up for its death in this relatively small area of land.

"This is the exact center of what was once Emerald Forest," Bulbasaur said. Vulpix noticed that he had tears in his eyes, and that his voice was quavering. "My parents conducted much of the forest's affairs from this very spot. These mounds… These trees… That's… They're…"

Bulbasaur sniffled and couldn't continue to speak.

He had been sadder than he'd ever let Vulpix know, that much she saw now for the first time. He'd acted so cheerful, but seeing the sadness in his eyes now, she couldn't help but think that all this time, the sorrow had been keeping him from really experiencing the happiness he had so successfully feigned. Obviously, this place bringing to the surface everything he'd been holding back.

Vulpix moved closer and sat down right next to him so that their sides were brushing; she wrapped her tails around his back and bulb in as comforting a gesture as she could manage.

"Yes?" she prompted quietly. "What about the trees and mounds?"

Bulbasaur sniffled again, and several tears fell down his face before he found himself able to respond. When he did, his voice was steadier than before. "The mounds and the trees… They're my parents."

Vulpix was surprised, but she didn't let her eyes stray from Bulbasaur, no matter how much she wanted to look over the trees and ground again.

"They came here to die when they knew they couldn't escape the fire," he said, his voice growing stronger and his tears starting to dry. "They… You see, we bulbasaur are born with these bulbs on our back. They provide us with a lot of the nourishment that we use to grow quickly. And we, in turn, give our bulbs energy from our bodies

so that they can grow even when the sun isn't shining. And when the sun *is* shining, we can use it to photosynthesize and heal ourselves. It's a constant relationship of give and take. We rely on the plant, and the plant relies on us.

"But when we die - whether it be as a bulbasaur, ivysaur, or venusaur - the plant lives on. Even a fire like this can't kill it. We say that even though our minds and bodies may die, our spirits live on within that plant. Once we die, it rapidly breaks down the nutrients in our bodies, using the energy to quickly grow. And what doesn't go to the tree still gets broken down into nutrients that other plants can readily use."

Tears once again began to gather in his eyes. "My parents came here so that their deaths could mean something. Starting from here, the forest will begin to grow again. They… They…"

He could no longer hold it in. His body shuddered as sobs shook him, and he did nothing to muffle the sound of his cries.

Vulpix squeezed closer to Bulbasaur, letting her body heat wash over him. She had no experience with this sort of situation, and yet… Somehow, for once, she knew exactly what to do. She stayed silent but ever at his side as she looked up to the trees that meant so much to her partner. She let his sobbing move her own body, and she even felt his sadness flood into her, though her own eyes remained dry.

It's beautiful, she thought to herself as the sun began to set, dyeing the otherwise dull landscape with vibrant haloes of gold and ruby. *What his parents did for the forest… and what they did for him. It's beautiful. They made sure that he was out of harm's way before coming here. And for that… I can't thank them enough.*

The sun was nearly out of sight when Bulbasaur's sobbing subsided and the quaking of his body all but ceased.

And in the silence that followed, Vulpix suddenly sat a little straighter, took a breath, and let a tune rise in her throat.

Bulbasaur looked over to her, surprised. What she was humming now was the song that she had only ever unconsciously been able to sing. He could tell that now was different than back then.

The song was loud as it filled the air around them before dissipating into ash; it had a purpose that had been absent whenever Vulpix had hummed it in the past. The mysterious quality was still there, as was the slow sadness. But now, they both could hear other feelings beneath what they had first perceived. The sadness wasn't just sad… It was bittersweet, and it also carried an overtone of hope. The mystery was there, yet something about it seemed apparent, as if this combination of pitches was somehow the most logical in the world.

Or perhaps they heard in the song what was reflected in their hearts: a truth about the world that only now had become apparent to them, thanks to Bulbasaur's parents.

Eventually, the song reached its final notes, and Vulpix let her humming trail off into silence. The two friends sat there for a few moments, now wrapped in the calm shawl of star-embroidered darkness.

"You remembered the song," Bulbasaur said, eventually. His voice was hoarse from crying, but it was now fully steady and sure, not just full of the fake certainty that he had been forcing these many weeks.

Vulpix nodded. "It just… Came to me this time. It seemed to fit, didn't it?"

"Yeah."

Vulpix smiled, lay down, and curled up against Bulbasaur's side more. "I'm glad. You said that you liked the song, so I'm glad I could remember it now. And I don't think I'll forget it again."

Bulbasaur didn't respond, but his body relaxed as he tucked his legs underneath his body in a resting position. "Would you mind if we just sleep here for tonight? It's just…"

He trailed off, but Vulpix knew what he was feeling. It was the same feeling that was filling her with warmth, even to the point that she could no longer feel the ice at her chest. The feeling wasn't something easily described. It was an overwhelming feeling of contentment, but it was also more than that.

What exactly it was didn't matter. What did matter was that so long as the feeling was there, and so long as the stars watched over them and the intertwined trees guarded them, and so long as they lay there at each other's side, neither of them wanted the moment to end.

So, when I first wrote this chapter, I was tearing up towards the end, which was kind of awkward because I was working the front desk of my dorm at the time (which is my job)… But I think I was getting teary 'cuz I get emotional when I'm low on sleep. And it might have something to do with the fact that I love Bulbasaur and Vulpix to an inordinate extent, so bittersweet stuff like this that involves them automatically get blown out of proportion in my mind. I still think the end is inherently a really cute scene, though, regardless of my bias. ^_^ It made me feel warm and fuzzy inside, and I think it might've managed to finally subvert the angst of Team Rebirth. Or at least, it felt that way to me.

Reminder: that poll that I mentioned last chapter is still up! Hardly anyone answered with who their favorite character is! Don't get me wrong, this is just a curiosity poll on my part, not super important or anything… but still. Vote if you get a chance! My curiosity is insatiable!

Thanks for reading!

Team Misfits

Chapter Eight: Team Misfits

"This still seems like a bad idea…" Isola said as she trotted through tree-filled meadows and the passes through the hills, the rest of her team on her back.

"Ah, don't be such a worry-wart!" Lisa said. "It's just a few ground types! Sounds like they wouldn't even be much of a problem, if they weren't working together to cause earthquakes. Besides, Cody's getting tons better at battling, aren't ya?"

Cody flicked his tail, annoyed. He sided more with Isola on this issue. "I still only know how to tackle, headbutt, and throw sand in pokémon's eyes. And since *you're* always hogging all the battles whenever we're on missions, I never get any useful battle experience. So no, I'm not getting tons better."

Ryan playfully tapped his own tail against Cody's face, causing the zigzagoon to sneeze from all the dust that was released from the fluffy, filthy fur. "Someone's a bit of a grumpy grumpig today. What gives?"

"Aw, nothing," Cody said with a shrug. "I'm just ready to get where we're goin'. At least when I was human, I could play my Gameboy on long car trips with my family… Here, I've just got to listen to you all blabbering away."

"Well, I don't know what a car trip is, or a Gameboy," Isola spoke up, "but maybe I can cheer you up. If my memory serves, Sheltered Vale is just up ahead."

"We sure the ground types are gonna be there?" Ryan asked. "I haven't seen any signs of earthquakes in a while."

"They were heading straight this way as far as the reports go. Can't hurt to at least check, and maybe hang out a while. They're sure to come eventually," Lisa said, jumping off of Isola's back while the doduo was still trotting along. "And when they *do* come, we've gotta stop them before they cross into the Southern Guild's territory. If we let our problems get out of hand, then all the other guilds will look down on us."

Isola frowned as she stopped, crouched, and let Ryan and Cody off. "Aren't we technically in Southern Guild jurisdiction right now? They had that huge mission here just a couple weeks ago… You know, when that pokémon evolved."

"Nah, it's right on the edge of both our boundaries," Ryan explained. "Sometimes they get requests from here, and sometimes we do. It's hardly set in stone, and no one cares all that much."

Cody stretched and, feeling refreshed, said, "Shall we get going, then?"

"That's the attitude I like to see!" Lisa said. "Come on, let's take care of these trouble-making earthquake makers."

As they approached the narrow passage into the valley, Ryan asked, "So, you think one of us will evolve while we're here?"

"And why would that happen?" Lisa asked.

"If someone else managed to evolve here, then maybe it's something about the place. It *is* so secluded, after all. Seems like a place where cool things might happen on a regular basis."

Cody shook his fur as if ridding it of water, disconcerted by the idea of evolving. "I'm already getting used to being a zigzagoon. I'd just as soon not change again."

"And being a one-headed doduo is bad enough," Isola chimed in, though she kept her voice low; unlike the rest of her team, she

wasn't beyond theorizing that stupid though they seemed, the ground-types could be lying in wait for any pursuers. "I can't imagine what being a one-headed dodrio would be like."

"But maybe your missing heads would appear if you evolved," Cody pointed out. "Even regular doduo grow an extra one when they evolve, don't they?"

"And maybe you'd become a neat-freak if you evolved, Ryan," Lisa said with a mischievous smile. "Aren't cinccino supposed to be even *more* nutty about cleaning than minccino?"

Ryan grimaced. "Suddenly, evolving doesn't sound like as much fun…"

"I wish I evolved instead of just growing into my adult form," Lisa pouted. "Then I could've forced myself to evolve already."

"Yeah, *that's* how it'd work," Ryan said, rolling his eyes. "Isn't kangaskhan growth a lot like evolution, though? It happens so fast that-"

"But it still ain't evolution," Lisa interrupted. "Time makes it happen, not power. Even if it does happen really quickly almost like evolution, I've still gotta wait for it to start, no matter how strong I am."

Cody looked to Lisa, perplexed. He still had trouble understanding the concept of evolution; and kangaskhan apparently had an even more different process of growth. "So wait, does that mean-"

Before he could finish his question, the entire world seemed to flip as Cody felt himself get yanked upwards. In the blur of sudden motion, he felt something lifting up on his body, and he saw the rest of Team Misfits getting lifted up along with him…

… and then, before any of them really knew what had happened, they were crammed together in a net of vines and spider webs, hanging from several strong tree branches.

"Reshiram and Zekrom above, what the heck is this!" Lisa yelled as she started to thrash about in hopes of getting down.

"Hey, cut it out! That hurts!" Ryan yelled at her.

"Can you guys keep it down?" Isola said in a whisper, her eyes wide with fear. "If there's this much here then-"

Cody was so used to being thrown around by Lisa that he practically didn't even feel inconvenienced by the netting; he simply grabbed ahold of the side to keep from laying on Isola, making her even more uncomfortable than the large pokémon already appeared to be. "I think it's a bit too late for that," he said. "The whole valley will have heard us by now. I mean, what with Ryan and Lisa-"

"Ah-hah! Caught you!"

The team looked down to see a group of pokémon running up; the pokémon in the lead, a galvantula, was the one who had just called out.

Once the group was near the net, the galvantula sparked with apparent satisfaction. "We already caught your friends, so there's no use struggling, you jerks!"

Ryan frowned. Or, rather, he frowned more so than he already had been in response to Lisa's struggles. "Friends? But we-"

"You idiots had better let the four of us down right now or I'm going to beat you all so hard that you'll move up north just to get as far away from me as possible!" Lisa yelled at the top of her voice, clearly infuriated.

"Ha! Like that's going to happen!" Galvantula said. "You guys deserve this for trying to mess with our valley right after we kicked out the last group of troublemakers!"

"DESERVE IT!" Lisa said, struggling so strongly that even Cody felt it on the opposite side of the net. "You pompous magikarp had better start apologizing, or I'm going to-"

"Just shut UP already, would you!" Cody shouted to Lisa. "Obviously there's been a misunderstanding, and-"

"You want me to beat you up here and now, Cody?" Lisa interrupted. "I'd be more than happy to oblige as warm up for taking care of these trap-using losers!"

In a barely louder-than-usual voice, Isola piped up, "Maybe we should all just calm down and-"

"Don't even try reasoning with them now, Isola," Ryan said. "Neither of them are going to listen to reason now. They're overreacting."

"Have I mentioned that your fur smells really bad when it's practically shoved up my NOSE, Ryan?" Lisa shouted. "I'm practically passing out now! This is NOT overreacting! Bathe every once and a while!"

In mock horror, Ryan replied, "I take offense at that, my dear Lisa! I bathe at *least* once a year! You just happened to catch me in spring when my usual bathing season is summer."

Isola sighed. "We must sound like such idiots," she murmured, just loudly enough for Cody to hear. Cody grinned as he forced himself to calm down. Annoyed though he was at Lisa's yelling and the current very cramped situation, things could be worse.

I could be the one stuck with Ryan's tail in my face, after all, he thought, chuckling a little.

Isola saw him laughing and smiled a bit herself; like Cody, she had guessed that they were hardly in any danger, and so she had no real need to be worried. For the moment, at least.

"Um, everyone, do quiet down for a moment! I'm afraid we've made a mistake!" a pokémon from below yelled.

"About time you realized that!" Lisa said as she and the rest of her team glanced down at the one who had spoken, a deerling who was standing next to Galvantula.

The galvantula turned to the deerling. "What are you talking about, Emma? They're obviously the pokémon that those other brats said were coming!"

Emma shook her head. "The other three were ground-types, weren't they? Don't you think these pokémon would be, too?"

"But they're even threatening to attack us!" Galvantula argued.

"Well, we *did* trap them in a net for no good reason, didn't we?" Emma said, smiling.

Before Galvantula could respond, there was a commotion as Cody felt something hot flare up somewhere behind him; in another moment, he and the rest of the team were tumbling back to the ground through a hole in the netting created by Lisa's fire punch attack.

The deerling walked over to the team as they all got to their feet, sore but otherwise uninjured. "Sorry about that," Deerling said, her voice sincere. The rest of the pokémon (aside from Galvantula) were all leaving now, apparently disappointed by the fact that there would be no intruders to battle just yet. "A couple of ground-types were making trouble in the valley earlier. We beat them and tied them up for the moment, but they said they had more friends coming. We were hoping the trap would give us a bit of an edge, but I guess we were wrong. Who are you pokémon, anyway?"

Lisa just grumbled in response, too angry to accept the apology but not so mean that she'd take out her aggression on someone who was apologizing. So Ryan was forced to take up the role of

spokespokémon. "We're Team Misfits. We came from the Eastern Guild to help out with the ground-type problem… Sorry we didn't get here soon enough to help you with the first batch, apparently."

"Not a problem. Though, to be honest, I'm not sure if you'll have much of a job to do now," the deerling said. "We've been waiting for the others for hours. I'm betting that the ground-types' friends have abandoned them. It's been getting kind of boring… And now that it turns out that our trap didn't trap the right pokémon, it looks like the other pokémon from the valley have abandoned the ambush. I don't really blame them." As she spoke, Cody finally noticed that, thought normal in every other way, she had only half of one of her ears; the blackened bits at the edge made him inclined to think that it had been burned.

I wonder how that happened? Looks painful.

"Is this the only way into your valley?" Isola asked, interrupting Cody's musings.

"Maybe not the only way, but by far the best way," Galvantula said as she finally joined the group, apparently over any anger she'd had towards them. "Sorry for my behavior earlier, by the way. I should probably have checked who you were before shouting accusations. Though I *do* think the trap itself was justified enough."

Ryan tilted his head and gave a nod, as if he couldn't blame her for that much. "Well, if this is the best way in and all of your other lookouts have left, mind if we stake the place out for a while? It's our job to catch these pokémon, after all."

"Sorry, but we've got it covered," Galvantula said.

"Don't be silly, Kara," Deerling said to the galvantula. "After we made the mistake of letting them walk into our trap, they at least deserve the chance to do their job." Turning back to Team Misfits, she said with a smile, "I'm going to see if I can get those other ground-types to talk, so that we know exactly what sort of pokémon we're looking

out for this time. I'll be right back. Kara, you think you can get the net set back up by yourself?"

The galvantula turned to the now wrecked net that lay in the grass and leaf litter. "Sure thing."

As the deerling walked off and Galvantula started with the repairs, the team members looked to one another.

"That was certainly an… interesting way to meet the pokémon we came here to help," Ryan said.

Lisa let out a snort of derision. "Yeah, interesting my butt. Wish I could teach them a lesson… Too bad I'm just too darn professional when it comes to a job."

Cody laughed. "You? Professional?"

"Oh hey, Cody, I just remembered - I still owe you a beat-down for those comments while we were still stuck up there!" Lisa said, advancing upon the zigzagoon slowly. "Time for-"

Isola stepped between them - seemingly on accident, though her team knew better - and suddenly addressed the galvantula as she worked on mending the seared vines. "Galvantula, you wouldn't happen to be the joltik that evolved during the Southern Guild's mission here, would you?"

Though Lisa still wanted to take out her anger on Cody, the question was enough to make her stop and look to the galvantula attentively.

Galvantula stayed attentive to her task as she sighed and said, "I guess *everyone's* heard about it by now… And that's what's causing all the trouble now. The ground-types said that they had headed here to find out how I did it, so that they could evolve, too. I feel kind of responsible for all this trouble now…"

"If you don't mind me asking, how *did* you do it? Evolve, that is," Ryan said. "I mean, it's been impossible for years. I even saw a pikachu touch a thunderstone once, but nothing ever happened."

"I don't know how it happened," Galvantula said. "One minute I was a joltik, the next I was like this. Maybe other pokémon will start evolving soon, too? Perhaps I was just the first of many. I can't imagine that I did anything special, except get really angry. And I'm sure I'm not the first pokémon to get angry in all these years."

Ryan shook his head. "The pikachu I saw was from our guild. He tried to use his thunderstone after hearing about you. Still didn't work."

"In that case, I really have no idea," the galvantula said as she stepped back from the mended net, admiring her own handiwork.

"What made you get so angry?" Cody asked, curious now that she'd brought it up.

"Someone was trying to kill Emma, that deerling you just met," Galvantula explained. "She'd recently come to our valley and had been doing everything she could to help us, so I couldn't just stand by and watch it happen." Then, as an afterthought, she added darkly, "And I couldn't just let a certain cowardly guildmember hold me back, either."

Isola tilted her head as if trying to comprehend. "Deerling had just come to the valley and you still wanted to protect her that badly?"

Galvantula turned to the group and, with a sheepish expression, replied, "Well, what can I say? She may be odd, but she doesn't deserve to die by any means. She did so much to help our valley, after all."

"Odd? That deerling?" Lisa asked. Perhaps because of the fact that Team Misfits could be described so well by that one word, the young

kangaskhan seemed more intrigued by this part of the conversation than by any of the talk of evolving.

"Yeah, she's kinda strange… Once you talk to her a while, that is," Galvantula said. "She won't even go by the name of Deerling - try it when she gets back. She won't even react half the time, but not because she's ignoring you or anything. And no matter how little she knows a pokémon, she always says that she goes by her personal name," Galvantula explained. "And she says she doesn't have any place else to go, but I can tell she's lying. Besides, with the battle skills and her genius, I'd bet she could fit in anywhere. She's probably more suited to be at a guild than here in this dinky little valley."

Ryan chuckled. "She's a liar, huh? Just like our dear friend Cody."

Cody's fur bristled momentarily. "No need to announce it to the world. Sheesh. And I'm not a liar, by the way!"

Ryan changed the subject. "Oh, hey, look. Deerling's coming back. Deerling! Any luck with the other ground-types?"

The deerling picked up her pace as she approached, trotting over in order to answer Ryan's question promptly. "Nope, no luck," she explained. "And by the way, call me Emma. Everyone does."

Ryan and Galvantula exchanged knowing glances before Galvantula spoke up. "I fixed the net itself, but I don't remember how we had it set up. Mind giving me a hand, Emma?"

As Emma explained to Galvantula what needed to be done, Team Misfits listened attentively. And once Galvantula was off tying down tree branches and attaching the ends of the net to the now tensely held back branches, Cody whistled appreciatively.

Or at least he tried. But with his zigzagoon mouth, it just came out as him blowing outwards noisily. His team and Emma looked at him quizzically.

He pinned his ears back in embarrassment. "Sorry. I was just impressed by the net rigging. Seems kind of complex. How's it work?"

Emma smiled. "It's not that complex, really. The ends of the net are tied to those branches, and those branches are tied down so that they'll spring back up if the webs holding them back are cut," she said. "I had Kara set it up so that once someone steps on the net, an electric charge travels through a thin web to the webs holding the branches down, which aren't electricity-proof. The strings snap, and presto! Anyone walking this way is caught, at least until they have enough sense to use a fire punch of something like that."

This time, Cody held back his urge to whistle in appreciation. Instead, he simply commented, "Wow. Sounds like something from an adventure movie or something. I never could've thought of something like that."

Emma's eyes widened a little, as if surprised. "Movie? What's that?"

"Ignore him," Lisa said. "Cody is crazy."

Emma looked back to Cody, apparently undisturbed by Lisa's warning. "Much madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye. Or so they say, anyway. So, Zigzagoon, my question stands - what's a movie?"

The whole "divinest sense" thing for some reason struck Cody as familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd heard it. He shook off the feeling and said, "You're not going to laugh at me?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Emma said.

Cody smiled. "That's more than my so-called team can say. Anyway, a movie is this thing that you watch on a flat area that shows you a story as if you're watching it happen," Cody said, choosing his words carefully so that they would make sense to a pokémon.

"What would you watch with something like that?" Ryan asked incredulously. "Battles?"

"Sort of," Cody said, though now his voice was sulky thanks to Ryan's obvious disbelief. "Action stuff worked. But also sad stuff, and stuff that made you think about things. Like how to be happy, life and death, stuff like that."

Looking more excited than perhaps was necessary (because, in fact, there was no reason to be excited right now), Emma said, "The eternal question of 'to be or not to be,' huh?"

"Yeah, that sort of…" Cody trailed off as realization suddenly dawned on him. He looked up to Emma, met her eyes, and saw that she had been waiting for him to figure it out.

To be or not to be… That can't be a coincidence! And there's no way the pokémon here have some alternate universe version William ShakeSpearow or something! I've been looking for a clue all this time, and I stumble upon one when I'm least expecting it!

"Um, Emma," Cody said, still almost too overawed to speak. "You wouldn't happen to want to scout ahead with me, would you? To see if the pokémon are coming yet or something?"

As Galvantula and the rest of Cody's team looked at each other in confusion, Emma promptly replied, "Yes, I think that'd be an excellent idea. I know a great path on the hillside that overlooks the pass into the valley. Follow me!"

Obviously too excited to hold herself back, she trotted off quickly. Cody didn't hesitate; he dashed off after her and, in another moment, the two had disappeared from sight between the trees.

The remaining four pokémon watched them go, all of them momentarily speechless.

"What in Zekrom's name just happened?" Lisa asked.

Galvantula just shook her head. "Beats me."

"So how is it that you know about movies and human stuff?" Emma asked excitedly as soon as the two of them were out of hearing range. They both kept their eyes open for any other stray pokémon wandering around, but other than that, there was no reason to mute their mutual excitement.

"I'm actually a human, believe it or not!" Cody said. "I somehow woke up here as a pokémon a while back, and I don't know how! And you?"

"Me too!" Emma said. "Was it about six weeks ago now that you woke up here?"

"Exactly!" Cody said, his tail unconsciously wagging in his excitement. "Or at least I think so. I haven't been keeping exact count. Do you remember anything about why you ended up here? My memories are all scrambled, but I think the last thing I can remember is dying in the cold, then waking up here."

Emma seemed startled. "You died?"

"Didn't you?"

Emma shook her head. "I don't think so… Though it's not an impossibility. I remember everything about my life, I think. The last thing I remember is getting really sick one school night. It was bad, so maybe I did die… But I feel like that's something I would remember."

Cody shivered. "It is. It's not a pleasant sensation… Though it didn't hurt or anything."

"Hmm…" Emma said, looking troubled. Then, shaking off that mood, she said, "Where are you from? As a human, I mean. I can't help but wonder… We *are* from the same world, right? It's not just parallel

universes or something crazy like that? I don't know what to think anymore."

"Well, I'm from the state of Kansas. In the United States. On Earth. My family had a dairy farm."

Emma brightened further. "It's gotta be the same world! I'm from London in the U.K., or Britain, or whatever you people across the pond call it."

"You don't sound British," Cody commented.

"And you don't sound American," Emma said. "We probably talk differently now than we did then without even realizing it. I know we're certainly not speaking English… I can't even quite remember what English sounded like. Anyway, what's the last date you remember?"

Cody had to think a bit harder about this question. "February of 2012 is the best I can think of. It was blizzarding when I died, that's for sure. Not summer weather."

Emma stopped in her tracks for the first time since they'd set out. "2012? Really? The last I can remember, it was 2021."

"So… We came from different times, then? Not all that far apart, but… Is that even possible?" Cody asked.

Emma shook her head. "I don't know, but that's got to be it. Either that, or you're missing a huge chunk of memory… Though if you died, that wouldn't make sense."

"Have you told anyone the truth yet?" Cody asked.

"No," Emma replied. "For the first few weeks I was traveling around, doing what I did with you - dropping obvious human quotes that I remembered in hopes of someone recognizing them. Then… Well, I didn't give up hope, exactly. But when I stumbled upon this place, I

decided I wanted to give them a hand - or, rather, a hoof. And then I decided to stay, and just keep my ears open for any news or folklores about humans. You?"

"I told my team," Cody said, "but they just think I'm nuts. They indulge my insanity, though, so we'll occasionally go on missions that seem to involve humans… So far, no leads."

"I'll probably tell Kara eventually… I just haven't worked up the courage yet. And it never seems like a good time. Then again, I guess there's never a good time to reveal something crazy like that."

Cody sighed. "I never thought that it'd be crazy to call myself human."

"You and me both," Emma said sympathetically. "Still, it's not exactly a bad thing. I'm kind of enjoying being a deerling. It's a new experience, to be sure."

Cody grinned. "I suppose it has its advantages at times. I'm not hating it as much as I did at first, at least. And it definitely is better now that I know I'm not alone… It's such a relief to meet you."

"Agreed," Emma said.

"So… What do we do now?" Cody said. "Now that we both know someone else who's human?"

Emma frowned. "To be honest, I don't think there's much we can do. We *could* form our own team and try to investigate things for ourselves… But neither of us know that much about this world, it seems. And besides, my solo investigations didn't work out that well when I tried that," the deerling said. "I say we just keep on doing what we've been doing. And if either of us hears anything of interest, we make sure to somehow let the other know. You said you're staying at the Eastern Guild, right?"

"Yeah," Cody said.

"And I think I'll be sticking around here for a while yet," Emma said. "So if you need me, just come asking around here."

"Shall we head back to the ambush spot, then?" Cody asked.

Emma nodded. "And we'll need to come up with some excuse for-"

She cut herself off as the ground beneath them suddenly began to shake violently, knocking her legs out from under her. Cody managed to stay on his feet since he was naturally lower to the ground, but that didn't help him much as some of the less stable trees around them tumbled down and, in doing so, made the ground less stable.

Before either Cody or Emma could do much about it - if, in fact, there was anything they might've been able to do - they were sliding down the mountainside together, tumbling with a slurry of loose rock, dirt, and downed branches.

It wasn't until they reached the bottommost passage between the two hills that they came to a stop, by some miracle not crushed by the multiple trees that had fallen with them.

Cody grouchily pushed himself back up to his feet, and said with a groan, "First getting caught in that net, now this?"

"Shh!" Emma warned. "It's probably the other ground-types. We might have just been caught up in the broader earthquake. They might not have-"

"-seen you?" another voice spoke up from the trees around them. They both turned to see a phanpy emerging from the woods, looking surprisingly arrogant in spite of his rather unthreatening appearance. He continued, "Sorry to disappoint you two, but we could feel you walking from all the way down here. Vibrations of the earth are our specialty."

As the phanpy spoke, more pokémon emerged from the underbrush. In a few moments, Emma and Cody found themselves surrounded by a sandile, a drilbur, and a hippopotas.

"Actually, I was going to say that you might not have been stupid enough to pick on the two of us, but I guess I was wrong," Emma said smugly.

Cody looked up to her wonderingly. What was she doing? Type advantage though she might have had, they were still outnumbered two-to-one. Not exactly the ideal battling situation. Getting these pokémon angry didn't seem like a great idea.

And angry was exactly what the phanpy was. "You'd better shut it and listen up, Deerling. We're looking for some friends of ours who went missing around here. You seen 'em?"

"Emma, we-" Cody started to warn her to cut it out with the biting comments.

Unfortunately, she had already started another one. "They were causing trouble in our valley, so we beat 'em and tied them up for a bit to teach them a lesson," Emma said. "Problem?"

The hippopotas suddenly stepped forward. "Thanks for being so frank. In that case… If we've got some hostages of our own, then I bet those pokémon down in the valley will be more than willing to let our friends go and tell us what we came here to know. Right, team?"

The other pokémon grinned maliciously as they tensed, ready for battle.

Emma braced herself as well, but she didn't seem worried at all. "You guys chose the wrong two pokémon to mess with. Right, Cody?"

Cody tensed as well, but without nearly as much of the graceful confidence that Emma portrayed. "Actually, I'm really not that great

of a battler…"

"That's okay," Emma said with a friendly smile. "Just do your best. I'm pretty sure I could take on all four by myself, anyway."

"Why you little… Let's get them!" Phanpy said as he ran forward.

Cody suddenly found himself faced with the sandile and drilbur as they charged, jaws ready for a bite attack on the one hand and claws ready for scratching on the other. Not entirely sure how to deal with two pokémon at once, he did the only thing he could think to do - try to spread out a sand attack among the two of them.

However, as he sent the sand flying, it didn't have quite the effect he had planned. With the sandile, it was very effective for the wrong reason; the sandile immediately began sputtering as the mix of rock, leaf litter, and other debris landed in his open mouth. With Drilbur, the sand attack hit its actual mark. Nonetheless, the drilbur managed to cut shallowly into Cody's fur and skin with his scratch attack.

As Cody prepared for his next attack, he saw that Emma was doing perfectly well; she was currently using a double-team attack, rendering the numerical advantage of the ground types relatively null; and, additionally, her grass type attacks were already leaving their marks.

I've just got to survive until either she finishes her half of the battle or the rest of my team comes running to find the source of the earthquake, Cody thought as he charged forward, headbutting the still recovering sandile right in his long snout. He dodged out of the way as Drilbur tried to slash at him again, responding with another headbutt attack. But this time, he had no momentum, and the attack didn't do nearly as much damage as he would've liked.

Then, before he could turn to get both opponents in view once again, he felt Sandile's strong jaws clamp down on his tail. He yelped in pain and tried frantically to attack his tormentor, but he wasn't quite flexible enough to do much damage. He saw Drilbur coming at him

again and, despite his very pained tail, he faced this oncoming threat with another sand-attack, which was about the only thing he could do with Sandile weighing him down.

This time, the sand in the drilbur's eyes caused him to miss; he quickly tried to wipe away the grit, but an energy ball attack from the other side of the battle knocked him to his side. As another energy ball came hurtling through the air, the sandile let go just before he could suffer the same fate.

Cody looked over and saw the deerling promptly get hit by a strong tackle attack from Hippopotas; Emma had been forced to ignore him while helping out Cody. Cody knew she wasn't down for the count, though. If anything, she still had the upper hand in her battle. Phanpy was already knocked out, and Hippopotas was on his last legs.

Cody turned his attention back to his own battle, hoping to finish Sandile and Drilbur off himself. Right as Drilbur got up, Cody headbutted him, this time with plenty of force. And this time, when the drilbur was knocked down into the mess of loose dirt and tree limbs, he didn't get back up.

Cody wheeled around to face the sandile. But right as he turned, a swirl of sand rose around him, buffeting him the closer he got to its walls.

I can't break out! Cody thought, panicked as he felt his strength slipping away with each gust of sand that hit. *I'll just have to endure it, and make a charge for sandile as soon as the sand disappears! I just-*

The sand tomb attack suddenly died down, and Cody charged forward to where sandile had been; however, he quickly brought himself to a halt as he saw that sandile was knocked out, and Emma was standing over him, looking barely injured.

"You all right?" she asked.

Cody could feel that his fur was all out of place, and he felt nearly as bad as if he'd gone a round with Lisa. "I probably look like a mess, but I'm fine," Cody said. "That was impressive, though! I barely did anything at all."

"Thanks," Emma said, "though it really had more to do with my type advantage than anything."

"Yeah, right," Cody said sarcastically. "Taking care of two pokémon while simultaneously looking out for me? That takes skill, regardless of type advantage. You sure you're really a human? You're too good at being a pokémon for that to seem realistic."

Emma smiled, apparently accepting the compliment. "I've been working hard at it, getting pokémon to teach me moves I don't know, as well as working out things by myself. It just takes a bit of effort."

"That's a lot of effort and a lot more natural talent, if you ask me," Cody said, wondering if maybe she lost that half and ear in some intense battle. "I doubt I could manage nearly half that much skill, even if my team ever let me help more in battle."

"HEY! Cody!"

Emma and Cody both turned to see Galvantula and the rest of Team Misfits running up.

Cody grinned in spite of himself. "Well, speak of the devil."

"Are you two all right?" Isola asked as she came to a stop at the head of the pack, out of breath from running.

Emma and Cody grinned at each other, than glanced around at the four knocked out pokémon around them. "I'd say we're at least doing better than these guys," Emma said.

"What is this nonsense?" Lisa said as she and the others finally caught up. "I didn't even get to battle on this mission. AT ALL. And

this was a mission for battling! Gosh darn it, Cody, you're going to pay for not leaving me any pokémon to fight!"

Lisa charged forward, but Emma walked in between them, a playful look in her eyes. "I'm afraid I'm as much at fault as Cody for taking away your fun," Emma said. "But I'm always up for a battle. Care to fight me instead?"

Cody looked at her, wide-eyed. "Um, Emma, that's not a good-"

"Bring it on, you deerling pansy!" Lisa said, now more excited than angry. "I have aggression that I'm not afraid to misplace onto your pathetic deerling butt!"

Galvantula, Isola, Ryan, and Cody all quickly moved out of the way as Lisa launched herself into battle with Emma.

Galvantula immediately started to cheer Emma on from where she stood at one side of the battle, though it was apparent from the beginning that, though Emma had tactical skill that far surpassed Lisa's straightforward damaging attacks, Lisa had an overwhelming advantage in terms of endurance and strength.

As they watched, Isola turned to Cody. "You sure you're all right?" Isola asked once again. "You look kinda… roughed up."

"Nothing worse than what Lisa does to me, I assure you," Cody said as he tried to smooth his fur out a little bit, wincing as the cut Drilbur had given him stretched uncomfortably. "Emma did most of the work. She's really incredible."

"Speaking of that deerling…" Ryan said as he sidled up to Cody's side. "What gives? Why'd you two run off all of a sudden?"

Cody took a breath to respond, but quickly stopped himself. As much as he wanted to tell Ryan and Isola the truth - at the very least, it might convince them that he wasn't crazy - he felt like it wasn't his

secret to reveal. And he hadn't bothered asking Emma whether or not it'd be okay to tell his team.

Best to keep it between us for now, Cody thought as he finally responded, "It's not really my place to say. It was nothing too important, though."

Isola continued to frown. "Cody, do you want to return to being a human?"

"Of course I do," Cody said automatically, wondering how much she and Ryan had guessed. After all, the only thing he really ever got excited about was human stuff; maybe they suspected that his excitement at meeting Emma was related.

"Oh," Isola said, looking even more downcast than before.

Cody looked up at her, curiosity mixed with concern. He had a bit of a soft spot for Isola, he had to admit, and seeing her worried like this made him worried in response. She reminded him of his little siblings when they had something on their minds, and he'd always felt responsible to do whatever he could to try to alleviate their troubles.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

The doduo turned her single head back to the battlefield, though it was obvious that she wasn't really paying attention as deerling finally forfeited the battle, unable to keep up with Lisa. "It's just that…"

She trailed off, unable to finish her sentence.

"Yes?" Cody asked.

"I'll be sad to see you go, is all," she said.

The statement surprised Cody. It wasn't so much the fact of it that stunned him; he'd gotten along relatively well with Isola from the beginning. Rather, it was the fact that he realized that he'd miss Isola, too, if he ever managed to get home.

And not just Isola… Ryan and Lisa too, annoying though they both might be at times, he thought.

"I'll be sad to see you go, too," Ryan admitted to Cody, though he had a mischievous smile on his face. "After all, who else will I get Lisa to pick on instead of me?"

Despite the joke, it's obvious that he means that he'll miss me, too… Cody thought, feeling somewhat conflicted for the first time since waking up in this world. *I'm still planning on going to go back to my family, but… Well, I'll miss our dysfunctional little adventures, I guess.*

I'm not entirely sure if this chapter turned out how I wanted it to. When I wrote it, it sounded good. When I edited it, it sounded okay. But both times, I was low on sleep, so I'm not sure which is the correct assessment. Oh well. The good news is, Cody's cheering up now and being a tad less judgmental, so I'm finally enjoying his character! And I guess having Lisa and Ryan around to lighten the mood helps, as well.

Also, I don't think I've mentioned yet that the character Ryan is named after a friend of mine, the only friend from real life who was awesome enough (and liked pokémon enough) to read the Language of Life. :D I always appreciated it a TON, so I wanted a character in here that sort of matches the spirit of him (not in the filthy way, but in the lovable joking way ^_^). And thus, Ryan the Minccino was born! So here's my official thanks to the real Ryan!

And also also, this site has been spazzy about letting me log in all week… I would have had this up earlier today if not for that. So be warned! Until this gets sorted out, I might have some issues uploading stuff and suchnot. If I don't get something out next Thursday and I haven't explained why in the chapter progress section of my profile, then that'd be the reason more than likely.

Anyway… Thanks for reading, everyone!

EDIT: Continuity check! Emma lost half her ear in the last chapter she was in, so I added mentions of it, since it's not something that Cody wouldn't notice. Nothing big.

Max

Chapter Nine: Max

"So, um… You hear about that scyther that's been going around?"

Luxio didn't respond as he and Max continued to plod through the narrow canyon, being careful not to slip off of the small ridge that was all that stood between them and the river far below.

Desperately wanting to keep the silence broken despite Luxio's obvious hostility, Max continued, "That scyther - Edge, wasn't it - he was here in our jurisdiction last time he was seen, wasn't he? He's been cutting up pokémon left and right… Even that group of three pokémon from the Western Guild wasn't able to beat him. It'd stink to run into him here, huh?"

Max glanced back behind him to judge the Luxio's reaction, and in another moment found the ground beneath his talons crumbling. He squawked with surprise and instinctually flapped his wings, which - after weeks and weeks of training - were just barely strong enough to keep him aloft for a few seconds.

The few seconds was all he needed, though; Luxio soon had the archen's scaly tail between his sharp teeth. With a grunt, he pulled the panicked bird back onto the more solid part of the ridge he was standing on.

"Be more careful," he said with a scowl.

As Max sat on the ground and let his heart calm down from the scare, he watched as Luxio pulled a piece of papery bark and a bottle of ink out of his explorer's bag; the luxio dipped one tip of his star-shaped tail into the ink and, with a few deft strokes, marked the unstable spot of the canyon path on his self-made map.

After he had put the two items away, he looked up to Max again and said, "No reason to just sit around here all day. We've got work to do." Though he had probably just saved Max's life, his distant attitude toward the archen hadn't changed whatsoever.

Max just sighed, picked himself up, and hopped over the newly-created gap.

He was so nice to me before that mission at Sheltered Vale… Why has he been so rude ever since then? No one else from the guild seemed to care that I was a coward. Why does it matter that much to him?

"So, um… You go on exploration missions like this often?"

No response.

Max's feathers ruffled up a bit in indignation, but he tried his best to keep calm as he continued, "It's really kind of cool. Just looking around, seeing what new things you can find…"

Luxio finally spoke, but not in response to Max's friendly observations. "Check those footholds just above you," Luxio said tersely. "There's a cave above and ahead of us a ways. We should see if we can get to it."

Rather than comply as he had for the rest of this exploration, Max let his feathers fully poof out from his body in anger; he felt like if he'd been a human, his face would probably be just as red as the crimson canyon walls that rose above him. He spun around quickly and, in a loud voice, said, "Look. I know I'm just along 'cuz you needed some sort of flying-type to check the stability of the ground for you, and I was the best thing available, and I know you'd rather have someone else along who's more help… But you could at least be nice to me, all right? I'm just trying to make casual conversation!"

Luxio's own fur bristled, though he tried to hide his agitation behind a calm voice. "Just hurry up and do it so that we both can get home as

quickly as possible."

"No," Max said firmly.

Electricity cackled in the air, fizzling out as it hit the dry canyon rock. "That's the mission, okay! We're supposed to be exploring this place. You gonna just forget about the mission 'cuz your angry with me?"

" *I'm* the one who's angry with *you* ? At least I deserve to be angry!" Max said. He was finally at his limit. Being paired up with someone who hated him for no apparent reason was just too much for a self proclaimed people-person like him to handle. "Seriously, why haven't you been talking to me at all? I'm a coward, I'll admit it! I tried to tell you that from the beginning, but you wouldn't listen! It's not my fault that I just wasn't ready to fight against something like that monferno!"

The sparks grew and grew to the point that they were hitting Max's beak. Still, Max didn't back down, and continued to meet Luxio's angered gaze. He wasn't used to fighting with former friends like this, and he hated it.

Aside from Luxio, I've tried and succeeded in befriending essentially every pokémon at the guild, at an acquaintance level at least. Then, with he mentally shook himself, and corrected, *No, not aside from Luxio… He was the* first *pokémon I befriended, after all! So what is it that happened?*

There was a tense few moments when it looked like a battle might break out. The thought made Max nervous, but he knew that Luxio wouldn't go overboard against him; there was no reason for him to be afraid, as he normally would've been against another stronger pokémon.

But then the Luxio let the electricity disperse from his fur as he relaxed. With a sigh, he lowered himself to the ground and curled up, his tail resting against his body and his head on his paws as he looked out over the river.

"… I'm sorry," he eventually grumbled, though he spoke so softly that Max wasn't sure he'd heard it.

"What?" Max asked, just to be sure.

"I'm sorry, all right?" Luxio said, still looking down at the ribbon of blue that threaded between the shadowed canyon walls. "You did warn me that you weren't that brave, and I got my expectations up anyway. I guess that wasn't too fair of me."

He spoke like he didn't really mean it, but Max could tell that he did; he just didn't like admitting he was wrong. If there was one thing he'd learned from being around Luxio, it was that he could be rather prideful at times. Immediately, all of Max's anger left him.

He lowered himself to the ground and carefully scooted up to the edge of their pathway, so that he could hang his legs over the edge. It didn't work quite as well as he would've hoped. Since his archen legs bent the opposite direction of his human legs, all he could really manage was having his talons in the air.

Max ignored that minor difficulty and looked over to Luxio, bearing no sentiments of haughtiness despite the fact that the Luxio had admitted his fault. Instead, he asked, "Why did it mean so much to you to begin with? I mean, so much that you wouldn't believe the truth, and so much that you'd stop being friends with me because I ran instead of fighting a losing battle?"

Luxio lifted his head, uncrossed his front legs, and began to knead the ground with his paws thoughtfully, as if the action might somehow loosen both his mind and body. "It's a long story… You see, my sister and I were the only two cubs in our littler, and by competing against each other, the two of us grew very fast. Our mom was a luxio, but in a couple years us two shinx had already surpassed her in power. When we realized that, we decided it was time to set out on our own. We both wanted to see more of the world than just Tallgrass Plains, where we were born."

"However, we… Wait, I'm not boring you, am I?" Luxio said, finally looking up to Max. "I mean-"

"Go on," Max encourage. "If it's a big enough story that you didn't want to be friends with me because of it, then it's far from boring."

Luxio grinned and a bit of his former seriousness dissipated. Max smiled back, glad to see his friend finally going back to how he'd known him for those first few weeks.

Now more engaged than before, Luxio continued his story while looking over at Max. "Well, me and my sister got into sort of the same situation as that whole mess at Sheltered Vale. We were staying in a new area for a while when an ursaring came and started bullying any pokémon he saw. Neither of us being crummy battlers - and, moreover, both of us being rather young and stupid - we decided to take on the ursaring. My sister broke a paw in the process, badly… It's never worked quite right since.

"Anyway, I was angry, so I decided to take him on again. He was on his way to beating me soundly, when all of a sudden, this little fluffball of a rufflet flies up and attacks the urasaring's face! The little guy could barely hold himself in the air, but even despite that, he was strong. I was surprised and grateful and ready to take advantage of his help. I redoubled my efforts. We still were nearly beaten, but both of us kept on fighting and fighting until… Well, just neither of us would give in. We were so determined, and both of us were so strong, that we both evolved. Then we managed to take down the ursaring.

"So I guess you could say that I've looked up to heroic types like that ever since then. I mean, that ursaring was way angry, and might've killed me if I'd been stupid enough to force myself to keep fighting, even when I was clearly beaten. So that rufflet earned my respect, and my thanks. Bet you can't guess the rufflet's name, by the way."

Max tilted his head, confused. "I dunno. Rufus or something? Rufus the rufflet is kinda a fun name…"

"Gale."

Max jumped up a bit, nearly losing his seat and tumbling off the cliff face. "Gale? You mean, like, Gale our *guildmaster?* "

"One and the same," Luxio said with a smug smile. "After my sister had recovered, the three of us ended up making a team for a while. But soon enough, my sister wanted to settle down. Gale and I traveled as a team of just the two of us for a while, but… Well, let's just say he can get a bit obnoxious at times. Plus, he was always more of a rescuer, while I much preferred exploring. We went our separate ways. He joined the Southern Guild and eventually fell in love with Mandibuzz, who was Virizion's deputy at the time. And when I heard that he was there, I decided to join up and do my explorations for the guild, rather than just for myself. I've always done my best to help other pokémon out, as well, since I look up to heroes so much."

By the end of the conversation, Luxio was no longer talking like he was explaining himself for his less-than-rational actions; he was just retelling a story, just like any friend.

"Guess I can see why you got so angry at me, then," Max said. "If you look up to heroes as much as that, then-"

"Nah, it still wasn't justified," Luxio said, casually but honestly. "But after hearing your story from that oddish, it just sounded so much like how Gale saved me. I got a bit excited. But I've thought about things more now, and I figure that it doesn't matter so much that you ended up running from that monferno, or those beedrill. I mean, you still tried to face up to them when it really mattered. That's the part I really admire. Plus, I think if you really tried, you've got enough power to really do a lot. I mean, two beedrill with one attack? That's still insane, even if you *were* backed into a corner!"

I little bit of Max's good mood left him as he listlessly began to rock his talons back and forth over the edge of the canyon wall. "Even if

that's true, it doesn't mean anything if I don't have the guts to use that strength."

Luxio dropped his gaze back down to the river below. "If it bothers you that much, why don't you just stand up to stronger opponents? Surely you can force yourself to, you know, actually-"

"That's just it," Max said. "I feel like I've tried to for years, but every time… Well, other thoughts and feelings take over. Like, when I was facing down Monferno… I knew I'd hate myself for backing down, but at the same time, my brain was just thinking that that monferno had the strength to kill me and joltik if she wanted to, and it didn't make sense to keep on fighting if that chance was there, even if prolonging the fight might've given us enough time for you or someone else to see us and help.

"And that's how it happens every time… I mean, not when I'm just training with someone from the guild, because in those cases I know that I might get hurt, but they aren't going to be completely serious. But against those beedrill, and that monferno, and… at other times, too, I just can't keep myself from running. No matter what's on the line, my own life always comes first… And I hate myself for that."

A confused expression showed itself on Luxio's face. "At other times?" he said, detecting seriousness behind the purposeful vagueness.

Max shrugged and turned away a little, obviously not eager to talk about it. "There was one time when I could've helped my little sister, but didn't. It didn't turn out well."

By the archen's tone of voice, Luxio suspected the worst, so he did his best to move the conversation away from that topic. "Well, that's why you're here at the guild, right? To overcome that fear that holds you back?"

"How'd you know, Luxio?" Max asked, surprised.

Luxio grinned again. "Everyone's got their reasons for joining. You don't seem like much of an explorer, but you're not much a rescuer, either. You obviously want to get better at one or the other, then, and rescuing makes the most sense, based on that story. Oh, and by the way, my name's Zeke."

"What?" Max said, confused for a second at the sudden topic switch.

Luxio stood up and stretched, apparently ready to get moving again. "My name's Zeke. You'd best remember it, too. I don't let many pokémon call me that, but what can I say? Coward though you might be, you're just too darn likeable. I bet everyone at the guild would agree with me on that account."

Max didn't respond, trying to figure out whether to be flattered at being called likeable or offended that Luxio was flat-out calling him a coward.

Luxio just laughed at his apparent confusion. "Come on, let's get going. I still want to check out that cave up ahead."

"Oh, right," Max said, taking a look at the footholds the luxio had previously mentioned, before this whole conversation had begun. With a flap of his wings and a little hop, he managed to make it up to the first foothold. It wasn't wide enough for him to really rest on, however, so he continued to use his legs and wings to propel himself farther and farther upward until he reached the broader ledge far above.

"So? What do you say?" Zeke shouted up.

Max looked down over the ledge and saw Zeke some fifty feet below him, his black and blue fur standing out in sharp contrast to the red rock around him. "Even if you could get a good grip on those little footholds, I don't think they'd be strong enough to hold your weight!" Max shouted back down. "Want me to check out the cave by myself?"

"Yeah, sure," Luxio said. "Just be careful not to slip off the edge again! Doesn't seem like a very stable shelf that you're on."

"Careful is my middle name!" Max yelled confidently back as he turned to look towards the cave just ahead of him. The path he needed to take was barely as wide as his body was long (minus his tail), meaning that he had to tread carefully; however, he'd more or less gotten the hang of things throughout the course of the day, and so he walked down the ledge confidently and without fear.

In fact, he even felt brave enough to let his mind wander back to the conversation they had just had. *I'm glad all that is finally sorted out,* he thought as he inched closer to the dark maw of the cave, which he noticed was several times his own height. *The rest of the mission will be a lot more fun without Luxio - or, I mean, Zeke - giving me the silent treatment.*

He reached the cave without incident and peeked in, wanting to go inside. But it got exceedingly dark just a few feet into the cave, and Max didn't like to think what could be hiding in those shadows. His fears were unnecessary, he knew, since very few pokémon lived here; but, as always, he couldn't override his worries.

"It's pretty deep, and pretty dark!" Max said, shouting straight down to Zeke, who had kept pace with Max's position. "What should I do?"

Luxio took a moment to think; up until now, he'd been able to use his flash to explore any of the caves they'd stumbled upon. Then, some idea coming to him, he cheered up and shouted, "You've been practicing dragonbreath, right? See if you can use it to light up the cave for a moment! Just to see if it really is deep enough to be explored, or if there's anything of interest."

Max turned back to the cave. "Well, it's still not much, but I guess it can't hurt to try."

He focused, calling forth the power that Vibrava had taught him to look for within himself. It was a sensation that was similar to his

ancientpower, yet different; it had a sort of grandeur to it that was quite a bit unlike the sheer feeling of age of ancientpower. According to Vibrava, the only reason he hadn't managed to learn the attack yet was that he was having trouble feeling equal to its sense of might.

As Max finally locked onto the small amount of power rising within him, he could see that she had been right. The dragon-type power seemed to contrast directly with how he felt about himself. He just couldn't get into the right mindset, no matter how hard he tried.

Oh well… A little light is better than none at all.

He opened his beak a breathed outward, releasing a small stream of something purplish that was not quite fire, but not quite anything else either. It went maybe ten feet into the cave and lasted only a few moments.

Yet the briefness of the technique wasn't due to any lack of ability on his part; the stream could've been maintained as long as he had breath. Rather, the moment his dragonbreath lit up the cave, he saw something shift from within the depths, just barely within the range of his dragonbreath's light. As soon as the violet light fell upon it, it dashed forward, a murderous expression lighting its eyes.

It was all Max could do to let out an alarmed squawk before the assailant was upon him.

Max dodged, staying just within the entrance of the cave as he instinctually swung out with a wing as a counter-attack. He wanted to run, but he reasoned that he didn't know whether or not the pokémon attacking him was a real threat to him or not. Max was by no means weak, and he was quite capable of holding his own against strong pokémon so long as he didn't have to fear for his life; there was a decent chance that Max would be able to deal with this pokémon, fast though it seemed to be.

By some miracle, Max's wildly-aimed wing attack hit the speedy attacker, who immediately jumped back into the shadows where Max

couldn't see him.

But Max had caught a glimpse of his assailant in that moment his attack had hit. And that one glimpse was enough to make his will to fight disappear. That green body that towered over him, the sheer speed of the assault, those twin scythes - there could be no doubt about it.

This pokémon was Edge the scyther, infamous among the guilds for his ruthless battle style and his tendency to leave as many of his victims dead as he left alive.

"Max! MAX! Are you all right? What's happening?" Zeke shouted, his voice echoing within the cave walls.

Max didn't have a chance to respond. The scyther leapt out of the shadows and attacked again. The scyther was closer than he had been before, and Max didn't have time to properly dodge the incoming edge of the scythe. Panicking, he did the only thing he could think to do. He lowered his beak to meet the scythe, shielding his more vulnerable body.

There was a clang as the hard steel met the solid beak, jarring both the attacker and defender with the force of the impact. Tears of pain streamed from the archen's eyes as he took a couple steps back out of the cave. He couldn't see the top of his beak, but it definitely felt as if even the tough beak had been no match for the blade; the pain was intense enough that it felt almost as if it must've cracked.

"Max!" Zeke shouted again; Max caught sight of him trying to scramble up the cliff side to help. "Max! Get down here so I can help!"

The archen didn't have the time to get back down, at least not in a safe way. Even with the help of his wings, Max didn't trust himself to drop down without misjudging his momentum and hurtling into the river far below.

And - more importantly - Edge was already coming back for another attack.

Max sidestepped away from the cave mouth, blinking back the water in his eyes as he turned and ran, digging his claws into the rock as he tried to keep himself moving quickly without falling.

He heard a buzz, and glanced behind him to see the scyther quickly gaining, his wings beating the air as they both lent speed to the bug's feet and helped him to keep his balance.

Just before the scyther had caught up, there was a flash of light and Max felt his feathers stand on-end. The buzzing and footfalls of the scyther abruptly stopped, and Max heard a clang of metal against rock.

Nearly out of breath, Max stopped and turned to see Edge singed by the thunderbolt but still conscious, one of his scythes dug into the wall to keep himself from falling.

"Max, jump down now!" Luxio said from somewhere below and some ways behind; like Max, he was out of breath from running.

"Already on it!" Max said as he stood on the edge and judged the distance to the ledge below.

He spread his wings just as the buzzing began again.

I need more time!

A hasty lightningbolt missed its mark, sending crimson shards of rock sprinkling downwards.

I have no more time!

Max spread his wings. The buzzing grew louder.

I have to go now!

Edge lunged right as Max stepped off the precipice, and both were soon tumbling towards the ledge below. But though both were falling, only one was in control of his flight; Edge was using his wings to make up distance, his scythes outstretched as he prepared for the kill.

Max didn't dare slow his descent with his wings, knowing that doing so would immediately put him within range of Edge's scythes. Instead, the archen's eyes were wide as the canyon zoomed past him, his brain going into overdrive to try to figure out something he could do.

But as soon as I hit the ground, it's over! I'll survive that much if I use my wings at the last moment, but Scyther will get me anyway! He's right above me! I'm dead I'm dead I'm dead!

What happened next was familiar to Max, yet it happened so quickly that it wasn't until afterward that he fully comprehended what had occurred. Out of the corner of his eye, Max saw Zeke running forward, trying without success to reach the spot that Max was falling toward. That in itself was nothing unusual, of course.

However, in the next moment, the luxio was glowing brightly and his body began to change. His limbs grew and he moved more quickly, surges of electricity flowing through his legs and lending him speed. Without really thinking about it, Max realized that now, the most important thing was keeping the fall from killing him, and so he flapped with his wings to slow himself down. He just had to trust that the newly-empowered Zeke would find a way to deal with the threat just above him.

And Zeke the luxray did not disappoint.

Right as Max hit the ground, Zeke leapt over his head and collided with Edge in a powerful spark attack, sending them both rolling onto the ledge just beyond Max. Though clearly injured from the fall, the Scyther immediately counter attacked, slashing open the luxray's

chest and giving Edge the chance to get away from the larger pokémon.

The broke away from each other only momentarily before diving right back into the battle, each struggling to use the narrow ledge to their advantage. Luxray slashed at the scyther horizontally, trying to knock him off the edge; but the scyther dodged and quickly counter-attacked, opening a narrow scratch on the luxray's leg.

"Zeke!" Max shouted, wanting to help. But the ledge was barely large enough for one pokémon to battle securely, let alone two side-by-side.

I've got to think!

Max looked around and quickly spotted a rocky part of the cliff nearby and, without a second thought, he climbed back up to the ledge above. After a little running and another controlled drop, he was on the other side of Edge.

"Zeke, I'll help out, too!" he shouted as he let the dragon power build within him before expelling it in a gust that, though not so mighty as he might've hoped, still managed to do some damage.

But that caused Edge to turn towards him and charge straight into the purple flames, mostly deflecting them with the flat of his blades. The dragonbreath attack fizzled out almost immediately as Max panicked and ran.

"We already did this once!" Max wailed back at his pursuer. "Can't you just leave me alone?"

This time, however, Max wasn't alone in the battle. Another thunderbolt attack stunned the scyther long enough for Zeke to catch back up. The luxray pounced and locked his lightning-cloaked jaws onto Edge's shoulder as he pinned the bug to the ground.

Max could see that the scyther was flagging now. With his free scythe, he tried once to attack, but missed as volts of electricity continued to surge into his shoulder. It was only on the second try that he finally hit his mark, opening a thin but long gash in the luxray's stomach.

The luxray backed off and glared at the scyther as Edge got back to his feet. But despite his tough guy act, Zeke was in bad shape; his limbs were shaking as he forced himself to keep standing.

"You're… coming back with us, Edge," Zeke managed to say, ignoring the blood that trickled steadily from his underside. "You've hurt and killed too many pokémon to be allowed to roam free."

"Oh, um, yeah!" Max added, trying to be confident even though he knew he'd flee again if the scyther came at him. "What he said!" *With any luck, the scyther's injured enough to want to stop battling a luxray and me, especially when I'm still mostly uninjured. Maybe-*

Max's thoughts were interrupted when the scyther suddenly stumbled, his exhaustion after that thunderfang attack apparently getting the better of him. He teetered for a moment on the edge of the cliff; then, before the situation had even processed enough for Max to think of reacting, the scyther fell off of the edge towards the river nearly a hundred feet below.

Max heart plummeted nearly as fast as the scyther fell. Turning to Zeke in a panic, he said, "Should we go help-"

"Watch," Zeke said as he kept his eyes trained on the falling bug-type.

The archen looked back over the edge and caught sight of the scyther again right as he opened his wings and pulled out of his dive, flying parallel to the water for a few moments before letting himself drop into the rather gentle river.

Max let out a sigh of relief as he plopped down on the ground. "Phew! Jerk of a pokémon though he might be, I'd have felt awfully guilty if we'd managed to kill him."

"You're kind of weird, you know that?" the luxray said with a relived chuckle as he practically collapsed to the ground, exhausted but not so badly injured that he wouldn't heal, given some time under Rose the audino's care. "From what I could tell from down here, that pokémon would've killed you with that first attack, had it landed. We already know that he's capable of it. And yet you don't want him dead?"

"Us guilds still don't try kill our targets, though, do we?" Max said. "And maybe the guy has his reasons… I dunno."

The luxray flicked his tail, conceding. "I suppose that's true," he said. "How's you're beak doing? That looks like one nasty scratch."

Though he'd momentarily forgotten about it in the heat of the battle, Max was now reminded of the ache that continued to permeate his beak. He tenderly reached up and touched his beak with the claws at the joint of his wing; even that light touch caused pain to shoot through him. He quickly jerked his wing away, but that touch had been enough to tell him that it was definitely no unnoticeable scratch.

"It's not debilitating… But it hurts," Max admitted. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough that the attack probably would have killed you, had you let it hit your body," Zeke answered. "Good thing you didn't."

"And what about you? You're okay, right?" Max asked.

The luxray shifted his position a little. "I'll be okay in a bit. It'll probably have scabbed over enough in an hour or so. We'll be able to leave around then. And it'll definitely heal, unlike that beak of yours." Then, he jerked his head upright and, with new excitement in his voice, he said, "Anyway, that's not even what matters right now.

Spill it! How is it that you make pokémon evolve when no one's been able to evolve in years?"

"What?" Max squawked in surprised. "I didn't do that! That was all you! And congrats on it by the way. That must be-"

"Don't try to change the subject," Zeke said with a toothy grin. "I know what I felt. I was wanting to do something to help you, but I knew I couldn't make it in time, and I hated myself for it and kept on pushing myself, and then… Well, it happened. But the power to do it came from you. That's what it felt like, anyway. And besides, that joltik is the only other pokémon to evolve in *ages*, and she was right next to you when that happened! So what've you been hiding? Have some special evolution stone tucked under your feathers or something?"

Max scowled as he looked at Zeke, letting the luxray's words slowly make their way through his brain. "Hmm… I hadn't even thought about it like that yet," he said, remembering back to that joltik's evolution. She'd been held up in Max's beak when she'd started evolving, after all. If that wasn't suspicious enough in and of itself, the fact that Zeke had evolved just now was. "Maybe you're onto something."

"Of course I'm onto something!" Zeke said. "Surely you must have some idea? This can't have happened without you not having any idea whatsoever why, right?"

Max suddenly had an epiphany as the one thing that set him apart from other pokémon finally connected to the coincidence of the evolutions.

Zeke saw the realization on Max's face, and his grin broadened. "You know, don't you? All right, hurry up and tell me!"

The archen debated for a moment before finally deciding that it couldn't hurt. "Well, the truth is…"

"You're a HUMAN!" Guildmaster Braviary shouted disbelievingly.

Guildmaster Mandibuzz whacked him gently with a wing. "Dear, do be quiet!" the mandibuzz chided, though no amount of chiding in the world could possibly take back that shout.

Max sighed as he looked around the infirmary, sure that the few pokémon in scattered within the large room had heard. In fact, he was quite certain that Braviary's voice had been loud enough that anyone and everyone in the guild probably had heard. "That's why I was *whispering*, Guildmaster! It wasn't something that I was about to tell every pokémon, you know!"

"But you've gotta be pulling my wing!" Braviary said. "Humans are just myths, aren't they? And there's no way around the fact that you're a regular old archen!"

No longer whispering since there was no longer any reason to, Max replied, "You're the one who asked! It's the only reason I can think of for why both Joltik and Zeke evolved when they were around me!"

"I was a bit incredulous at first, too," Zeke admitted as he scratched at some of his bandages with a paw. He was the only reason they were discussing the topic in such a public place; Max had gone straight to the infirmary with the injured luxray, and he'd been in the middle of getting his injuries wrapped up when Braviary and Mandibuzz had shown up, anxious to hear an account of the eventful mission.

Mandibuzz tilted her head. "But you believe him now?"

Zeke nodded. "I mean, it's Max. He doesn't exactly strike me as the lying type."

"It's true!" Max insisted, wanting to be believed since he'd finally told the truth. "I don't remember much about being a human, but I definitely was one before I woke up here in Woven Forest."

Before Mandibuzz could reply, a little yellow pokémon suddenly appeared just next to Max, a mischievous look on her face despite the fact that she appeared to be asleep.

"Did I hear right, guys?" the abra, Fum, said excitedly. "Someone's a human? That's crazy! Can't wait to tell my sisters!"

"I don't care who's a human and who isn't, but you all need to quiet down or leave!" Rose said as she stormed over, her voice quiet yet threatening. "I have patients who are resting!"

Mandibuzz sighed as she looked at the quickly escalating scene they were creating. "Of course, Rose. We'll go somewhere where we aren't disturbing you," she said. Then, turning to the abra, said, "And *you*, Fum, need to keep your nose in your own business for once in your life. Off you go!"

"Nope!" Fum said, being purposefully loud. "Not until I find out who the human is! Luxi- I mean, Luxray, is it you? Or is it you, Max?"

"Fum, that was not a request!" Mandibuzz said, becoming visibly annoyed. "You are to drop the matter this instant!"

"Oh, never mind, I figured it out!" Fum said excitedly. "It's gotta be Max, right? 'Cuz you came out of nowhere, and I've known Luxi-Luxray too long for him to have been a human all this time without me finding out! All right, thanks guys!"

Before anyone could stop her, Fum vanished as quickly as she had come.

Zeke cast Max a knowing glance. "So much for keeping it between only a few pokémon," he said. "Now that she knows, every pokémon at every guild will know by nightfall…"

"And the news will just spread from there," Guildmaster Mandibuzz said with a sigh. "I do believe *someone* should be apologizing right now for opening his big beak and letting the whole guild hear him."

Braviary ruffled his feathers in embarrassment. "Oh, right. Sorry about that, Max."

"You know what? I don't think I really mind, I guess," Max said, too exhausted from the mission and the sudden flurry of activity to care too much. "It's nice to not have to hide it anymore. Besides, with any luck, everyone will just think it's a crazy rumor."

"If you want everyone to think it's a rumor, then you'll have to keep lying about it, Sweetie," Guildmaster Mandibuzz reminded him, her usual motherly persona returning. "Is that really what you want?"

Max thought for a moment. "That depends, I guess. Do you all actually believe me?"

"I wouldn't, but myths *do* tend to attribute strange happenings like unusual evolution this to humans," Mandibuzz said. "Beside, what sort of guildmaster would I be if I didn't believe my guildmembers?"

"Ha! That's right!" Braviary crowed, just as loud as ever. "It's a bit strange, but I don't see any reason not to believe you!"

Zeke tapped Max's wing with his star-tipped tail. "And we discussed this the entire way back here. You already know I believe you."

"Guess that's that, then!" Max said. "I don't see any reason to keep it a secret any longer, so long as not everyone thinks I'm crazy. Besides, what's the worst that could come of everyone knowing?"

"What's the worst that can happen?"

~Cue worst thing happening.~

Anyway… Sorry! One day late… My bad. I misjudged how much time several of my homework assignments would take this week and watched My Little Pony when I should have been writing this or doing that homework… I feel like this is a justifiable defense, and

shall leave it at that. On that same note, though, I'm afraid I may not be able to finish a chapter for next week, since I've got a ton of homework. I'll try my best, though, so keep an eye on my profile if you're curious.

Also, I think it's about time for shameless self-promotion! If you simply stumbled upon this fic and have not read any of my other pokémon fanfics, then I highly suggest you go check out the Language of Life. If you like my writing style overall and you enjoy save-the-world trainer fics (I know, so original), then you may very well like it. Or if you enjoy the idea of a trainer who can communicate with pokémon, or you want to see my view of how politics might work in a world filled with weaponizable creatures, or you want to see my take on myth and religion in the pokémon world, then you also might like it. ^_^

Also, PLEASE NOTE that I had a continuity error with the last chapter. I'd forgotten that I'd burned off half of Emma's ear in that first chapter she was in (since I hadn't originally been planning it), so I edited in a moment or two where Cody noticed it, since that's not exactly something you just ignore when meeting a pokémon for the first time. Nothing big, but I thought I should mention it.

Team Rebirth

Chapter Ten: Team Rebirth

"So, Um, Bulbasaur… I was wondering…" the disheveled vulpix started to say as she trudged through the paw-deep swamp waters, further muddying her fur. The water was cold as ice, and even her natural fire felt subdued by the persistent dampness. Over the course of this simple item-find mission, Vulpix had learned that Chilled Bog certainly lived up to its name.

"Yeah?" Bulbasaur asked, looking just as miserable as his partner if not more so, since his low-to-the-ground head was constantly dipping into the water. "Something wrong?"

Vulpix suddenly lost her courage. "Never mind. It was nothing."

"You can't just say that you're wondering something and then not tell me what," Bulbasaur said, looking less bothered by the chilly water and mud than Vulpix. "You've gotta tell me now. What is it?"

Stalling for time because she still didn't want to answer, Vulpix adjusted the small bag hanging close to her side, within which was the item it had been their mission to find. Whens she finished, she began walking again, but she still didn't respond.

"Come on, Vulpix. You can tell me," Bulbasaur insisted.

Well, so long as I go about this carefully… "You heard about that archen who's actually a human, right?"

"Of course," Bulbasaur said. "Everyone has. Not sure if I believe it, though…"

"He did make two pokémon evolve though, which is strange," Vulpix said. "So I think it's true." *Even though I haven't made any pokémon evolve… Maybe it takes some special human knowledge that I lost.*

Bulbasaur half shrugged. "All right, I'll give you that. So supposing it's true, what about him?"

Vulpix's voice got quieter as she said, "I was, um, wondering if we could go meet him." Bulbasaur gave her an odd look, so she continued more defensively, "On that first day I met you, you said that my memory loss sounded like something out of a human myth or something, right? I was thinking that maybe he might know what happened…"

"I did say that, I guess, but it doesn't sound like this guy can help you," Bulbasaur said skeptically. "From what I heard from Fi, the archen himself doesn't know how he ended up that way, nonetheless remember a whole lot about being human. He sounds like a bit of a ditz, in all honesty."

Vulpix wanted to argue - this was her one chance to maybe find out about what had happened to her, after all - but at that moment she heard something farther within the bog, where the waters got somewhat deeper.

She stopped and cocked her head, trying to pick up on whatever it had been. It had seemed close.

In another moment, the sound came again; this time, it sounded unmistakably like a groan.

Bulbasaur stopped as well and looked out over the bog, trying to follow Vulpix's searching gaze. "Something wrong?" he asked.

Finally, Vulpix found what she was looking for: something floating in the waters, something not quite like the logs and weedy clumps that Team Rebirth had passed up until now.

"Bulbasaur, there's someone over there, and whoever it is is injured, I think," Vulpix said. "Can you reach him?"

"You're taller than me," Bulbasaur said. "Why don't you…" He trailed off as he saw the fear in Vulpix's eyes. "Oh, yeah. The whole deep water thing. All right, I'll get whoever it is."

Carefully, Bulbasaur inched out towards the deeper part of the bog, using his vines to feel around beneath the water for solid rises of mud that he could walk around on.

Eventually, he got to the point where he could just barely keep his nose above water. Still, he was close enough now that he could reach the limp figure with his vines. He grabbed it tightly and lifted it, only to find himself pushed further into the muck by the added weight, so that only the top half of his bulb showed above the water.

"Bulbasaur!" Vulpix cried out in worry, going forward a few steps before stopping herself.

Though she couldn't see him any more, Bulbasaur didn't appear worried; his vines carefully but quickly moved the mud-covered bipedal pokémon closer to Vulpix, into waters that were shallow enough that even the water-fearing vulpix could reach it. Once he had let go, there was a little turbulence in the water where he was submerged as he managed to squirm out of the mud and surface again with a gasp, now completely filthy from the dirty waters.

"Are you okay?" Vulpix shouted.

"Yeah," Bulbasaur said as he moved slowly back towards her. "Just worry about that sneasel! From what I could tell, she was badly injured!"

The vulpix walked over to the sneasel who was now just barely conscious, apparently jostled awake momentarily thanks to Bulbasaur's attempts to save her.

"Are you okay?" Vulpix asked and, without waiting for an answer, said, "We'll get you back to the guild, so don't worry. You'll be fine."

The sneasel's eyes scanned Vulipx for a few moments with something like fear; then, either because she had realized she was fine or because she was on the verge of passing out again, she calmed and, in the smallest of whispers, said, "I'll trust you."

"As I told her, she'll be better in a couple days so long as she doesn't touch those bandages," Miltank, the designated healer of the Western Guild, told Team Rebirth when they came to check on the sneasel the next day. "But she'll barely say a word to me to tell me how she possibly got those injuries. Maybe she'll talk to you, Vulpix?"

Almost as soon as Vulpix had come in the room, Sneasel had hurried over to her side and promptly placed the vulpix between herself and the other two pokémon in the room.

Bulbasaur chuckled. "Well, she does seem to be attached to you already. Want to see if she'll answer you?"

Vulpix, unused to being around any pokémon other than Bulbasaur, was already weirded out by the situation. It was with difficulty that she managed to say, "So, um… Sneasel? What happened?"

"It was just a battle," the taller pokémon said, her voice at a normal level despite her shy behavior. "I wasn't ready for it."

"You certainly weren't!" Miltank agreed. "Thankfully, we guild healers know some of the best healing tricks around. I'll want you to stay here at the guild while you're healing, though, so I can be sure those wounds heal right, without getting infected. And you need to take it easy. You can be on your feet, but no battling, and not much exertion. Got it?"

The sneasel nodded, and added to both Miltank and Team Rebirth, "Thanks. I don't know what I would've done without your help."

Miltank smiled. "That's already more than you've said to me since waking up! Frankly, I'm just glad you can speak. I thought maybe

you'd been injured in some way I couldn't find."

"So anyway, what'd you do to make her trust you so much?" Bulbasaur asked Vulpix playfully.

"Um, I don't know… I guess I was the one who carried her back, after all… Maybe she'll tell us?" Vulpix said, turning to Sneasel.

She smiled sheepishly. "No reason in particular, I guess. Sorry if I'm being rude…"

Bulbasaur laughed. "Vulpix, I think you've finally found someone as shy as you! Almost, anyway. Since Sneasel will be staying at the guild a few days, why don't you show her around? I was hoping to get some training in this morning, so you've got time."

Vulpix saw the sneasel brighten considerably, her feather ear perking almost straight up with happiness. *I had been planning on giving fire blast a try again this morning, but…* "All right. Uh, shall we go?"

"Yes, please!" the sneasel said, excited. "Lead the way!"

Vulpix looked to Bulbasaur pleadingly, hoping that maybe he'd help with the tour. However, he kept to his earlier resolution and rushed out of the infirmary before Vulpix could say another word.

Not knowing what else to do, Vulpix left the infirmary more slowly and began to lead the way through the labyrinthine passageways of the guild. She wasn't entirely sure what to say or how to start a conversation with the sneasel; thankfully, Sneasel's 'speak only when spoken to' attitude almost immediately dropped once the two of them were relatively alone, passing only a pokémon here and there in the hallways.

"So this whole place is entirely underground, huh?" Sneasel asked.

"Uh, yeah," Vulpix said.

"And that stuff that glows in the ceiling… What is it?"

"It's metal, or something like that," Vulpix replied, remembering back to her own first day at the guild when Bulbasaur had shown her around. "Either the guildmaster or the deputy hits it with an electric attack, and it stays lit all day and night."

The sneasel looked up at the ceiling with new appreciation. "Wow… So that bulbasaur said I'm almost as shy as you, right? I'm not normally like that, by the way… I'm just a bit skittish right now. My last battle nearly scared the feather off my head. It's just taking me a while to adjust."

Talking to you just right now, I'd say you're already adjusted, Vulpix thought.

"In all honesty, though, I kinda lied a bit back there," the sneasel said, looking unashamed. "I didn't trust you for no reason at all. I saw the nervermeltice at your neck."

Vulpix continued to walk forward, but she turned her head and, both excited and anxious, asked, "Do you know something about it?"

Sneasel scowled. "Of course. Don't you?"

Vulpix shook her head. "I haven't a clue. I woke up some time ago with no memory. The guild found me and took me in. Could you tell me about it?"

"It's hardly anything important," Sneasel said after a moment's pause. "Nevermeltice has become something of a fad up north, though it's rare enough that you have to sort of be in the know in order to get any. A lot of pokémon wear them, even those who don't know any ice type moves. When I saw yours, I thought that maybe you came from somewhere near where I live, and so I sort of clung to that idea."

"Do you know how to get it off?"

Sneasel looked even more perplexed. "Get it off? Is it stuck?"

Vulpix stopped and extended her neck in such a way that Sneasel could examine it. "It's too tight to slip off, and the cord won't break."

"That's… interesting," Sneasel said as she picked at the cord gently with one of her claws; in response, the cord seemed to grow colder, sending a chill through Vulpix's body. Sneasel continued, "I don't really know why that would be. I've never seen anything like it. You sure you don't remember anything about it?"

"Nothing at all," Vulpix assured, crestfallen.

"Well, don't let it get you down too much!" the sneasel said as she cheered up. "When I head back up north, maybe you'd like to come with me? I bet we can figure out something about it."

Vulpix was shocked by the suggestion; she'd never even considered leaving the guild, except for missions. "Oh, but… Um… I don't know…"

Sneasel laughed, her voice clear like the ringing of crystal ice. "That bulbasaur friend of yours wasn't lying! You act like a bit of a pushover, you know? Anyway, there's no need to decide now. But think on it a bit. I really wouldn't mind helping you out. You two saved me, after all."

"I'll think about it," Vulpix said more confidently.

The sneasel smiled broadly. "Glad to hear it. So, care to continue showing me around?"

"Hey, Vulpix, want to train some together before choosing a mission for the day?" Bulbasaur asked as the two teammates got out of bed, awoken by the sudden surge of electricity through the metal-threaded ceiling.

"Not today," Vulpix said as she straightened out the fur of her tails. "Sneasel wanted to train with me again."

A dismayed look came to Bulbasaur's face, though he quickly tried to hide it. "Again? But we never train anymore!"

Vulpix felt guilt worm its way into her heart. In the week or so that Sneasel had fully recovered and started doing missions at the guild - not as an official member, but to see if she liked it, she said - the two girls had spent a lot of time training together. Meaning that Team Rebirth spent a lot less time together as an actual team, at least outside of missions.

"Sorry," Vulpix said quietly. "But I'm trying to learn fire blast, and you're afraid of fire."

"Hmph! Like I'd let that get in my way!" Bulbasaur retorted, though he and Vulpix both knew that it would. "I need to get over that fear anyway. And Sneasel is an ice-type! She can't possibly enjoy training with you any more than I do."

Vulpix kept her eyes on her tails as she continued to smooth them with a paw, though they already looked fine. "She says she wants to overcome her weakness to fire. I'm not sure if it's possible, but she's certainly giving it her best shot."

"Doesn't change the fact that we're still partners," Bulbasaur pouted. "We ought to be training together."

"I know, I know," Vulpix said as she scratched at her necklace, which felt tighter than usual all of a sudden. "Tomorrow, I promise. Anyway, Sneasel will be waiting for me. I've got to go."

Before Bulbasaur could respond, Vulpix hurried out of their room and through the corridors, heading deeper into the ground until she finally reached the training grounds in the lowermost part of the guild. She traveled from chamber after chamber - skirting around the edges of some in-progress training battles - until she finally came to the agreed meeting place.

"Hey, Vulpix! What took you so long?" Sneasel said as Vulpix trotted up, slightly out of breath.

"Bulbasaur wanted to train today," Vulpix said.

"He's been kinda pushy about that lately, huh?" Sneasel observed.

"Um, not really," Vulpix said. "I mean, I am his partner and all."

Sneasel frowned a bit, concerned. "Other pokémon don't train with their partners every single day, do they?" she asked. "I hate to break it to you, but Bulbasaur's kinda hogging you to himself. He's just jealous. It's not a bad thing or anything, it just means he cares about you. But you can't let him boss you around just because you don't remember past a few weeks back."

Vulpix itched at the cord around her neck again, feeling uncomfortable about the conversation. *Is that really what's going on, and I'm just blinding myself to it? I've hardly talked to any pokémon aside from Bulbasaur before Sneasel came along… But that was my own choice, wasn't it?* "Why don't we start sparring?" Vulpix mumbled, gracelessly changing the subject.

Sneasel didn't hesitate to comply. She immediately slashed out with a claw, and Vulpix jumped back, already prepared. In another moment, she leapt forward in a tackle attack, which Sneasel tried to block with her claws. Still, the impact managed to send the sneasel to the ground. Rather than get discouraged, the ice-type leapt right back to her feet and once again came in for the attack. Such was how their training always started: physical attacks to get them warmed up.

As they hit and dodged and repeated the process, Sneasel spoke up between cycles. "Really, you need some time with other pokémon, not just Bulbasaur."

Vulpix went in with a quick attack, which Sneasel somehow managed to dodge, if just barely.

"I bet Bulbasaur never talks to you about how nice your fire-type attacks are… Or if he does, he doesn't mean it."

A little fire leapt into Vulpix's chest as felt her mood shift into a more defensive mindset. *He does mean it,* Vulpix thought as one of Sneasel's claws grazed her side. *Right? I'm not just being overly trusting because he's the first pokémon I really met… Right?*

"Just don't rely too much on him," Sneasel said.

The flicker of fire within Vulpix suddenly flared up, more with shame at herself than with anger Sneasel's suggestions about Bulbasaur. *Have I really been relying solely on him? And has he been letting me? I can take care of myself!*

Before Vulpix could quite stop herself, she shot a stream of flame towards Sneasel, who partially deflected the fire with her big claws. The ice-type grimaced in pain.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Vulpix said as she ran up to Sneasel. "I don't know what came over me…"

The grimace shifted to a grin. "Sorry? That was the closest to a fire blast you've gotten yet! It was still just a glorified flamethrower, sure, but it was better. You sure you don't want to try just practicing intensely on it alone, rather than interspersing it with battle? I bet you'd get the hang of it more quickly if you did."

Vulpix shook her head. "I don't get as fired up if I'm not battling. Are you sure you're okay, Sneasel? I shouldn't have-"

"Don't worry about it, really," Sneasel said. "And you know, call me Streya. All my friends do."

Vulpix calmed down, the show of friendship warming her.

Yet somewhere within her, an icy thought of doubt was piercing her mind; she shook it off rapidly, discounting it immediately. Yet the idea

of it remained at the back of her mind as she and Streya resumed their training.

Would Bulbasaur have been so forgiving if I'd accidentally blasted him with fire?

A couple nights later, Vulpix awoke in the dark with a shiver, a whimper of fear escaping her lips. She'd been falling farther and farther beneath the black water as it sapped the life from her. She'd tried to swim up, but the necklace at her neck just got heavier, and heavier, and-

She shivered again as she looked around the dim room, still scared despite the fact that the nightmare was over. Bulbasaur was sound asleep. The threaded ceiling above her head just barely glowed. There was no water in sight, so she had no reason to be scared. But she was. Heart still pounding, Vulpix reached up a paw and picked at her necklace, trying in vain to get the cord away from her neck.

She froze with horror when she realized that the cool material beneath her paw that held the nevermeltice in place was no longer a cord. She'd had her suspicions over the last few days, but now, sitting there in the dark, she had no doubts. The cord was thickening and stiffening and widening, becoming ever more like a collar made of ice. She reached up and felt the main chunk of nevermeltice still hanging from it, colder than ever.

Vulpix's chest heaved as her breath came more quickly, nightmarish panic setting in. She looked over to Bulbasaur and, for a moment, she desperately wanted to wake him up, if only so that he might comfort her and tell her that the necklace wasn't so bad, and that they'd figure something out. But she immediately dismissed the idea.

Bulbasaur will be angry if I wake him up, I bet. He's already upset with me for spending more time with Streya than with him. And he'll just dismiss it. Maybe it's not even bigger. Maybe I'm still half dreaming. I need to calm down. I need to calm down.

But she couldn't. The panic continued to rise in her until she couldn't stand it anymore. She had to get away from the cold, somehow.

She ran out of the room and went deeper and deeper through he dark passages, until she reached the training grounds. And once there, she let the fire within her flare to its brightest as she practice her flamethrower again and again and again, mindlessly changing her technique each time as she tried to figure out the technique that would enable her to do a fire blast. Slowly, the repetition calmed her, and her own fire warmed her. And before she knew it, she was completely exhausted. She lay down on the ground for just a moment to rest, and immediately she passed out.

Vulpix only awoke again to a gentle nudging, accompanied by a slight chill. She opened her bleary eyes and saw that the lights of the guild had already been recharged. Standing over her was Streya, a concerned look on her face.

"Vulpix? What are you doing here?"

Vulpix stretched and quickly smoothed her fur, embarrassed. "Um, I couldn't sleep, so I came here to train. What are you doing here?"

"I normally get some early-morning training done before you come down," Streya explained. "But you couldn't sleep? Why not?"

"Nightmares. And…" she hesitated for a moment.

"And?" Streya prompted. "You know you can tell me anything, right? I'll listen."

She's from the north… I know she didn't know anything about why I can't get the nevermeltice off, but maybe she'll know something about this! Or at least she might know someone who knows something!

"My nevermeltice necklace," Vulpix said, scratching at it self-consciously. To her horror, it felt to have grown more even since last

night. It was now nearly a fourth as wide as her paw, which though by no means a huge width, felt like a terrible amount when it was locked so tightly around her neck. "It's been growing, and I don't know why. You wouldn't happen to know, would you?"

Vulpix saw a flicker of some emotion flit within her red eyes. *Insight? Triumph? Did she just remember something?* Whatever it was, it disappeared in a moment as Streya averted her eyes to the ground.

"Vulpix… I'm really sorry, but there's something I haven't been telling you," she said apologetically. "It's just… It's really important, and I wanted to make sure that your nevermeltice wasn't a trick or something. Now I know it's real. You see, it-"

She suddenly jerked her head towards the entrance to this battle chamber, as if she'd heard something that Vulpix hadn't.

She quickly turned away as if dismissing it, but when she continued, she did so in a much lower voice. "Once Bulbasaur is asleep tonight, would you meet me outside the guild? What I have to say is just too important to risk being overheard."

Vulpix nodded solemnly. If Streya said it was that important, then she could wait until the guild was asleep to find out.

The sneasel seemed pleased that Vulpix wasn't going to press the matter. "Well, now that that's settled, care to do some training? Or you want to hit the hay? Seems like you had a rough night."

Rather than answer, Vulpix fired off a flamethrower at close-range; since both pokémon were now used to these sudden starts, Streya managed to escape with only a singed ear. She counterattacked with an icy wind that seemed colder than usual. Vulpix half wondered if maybe it was the sneasel's ice type attacks that had been making her necklace grow.

But that's silly. It's been growing gradually, not just during battles. So what, then? What is it that Streya knows about this thing that I don't?

The two pokémon had barely worked up a sweat when they heard the scraping of small claws as someone hurried through the corridor that led to their battle chamber. Both stopped right as Bulbasaur came in, out of breath. He immediately locked his eyes on Vulpix and rushed up to her.

"Vulpix! I've been so worried!" Bulbasaur said, a little bit of anger in his voice. "When you weren't in our room when I woke up, I looked everywhere! Of course, I guess I should've figured that you'd have come down here… But why didn't you tell me? You always have before. It would've saved me a lot of worry!"

"She doesn't have to report her every action to you, you know," Streya pointed out calmly.

Bulbasaur flashed an angry glance at the sneasel before turning back to Vulpix. "Vulpix, we're a team. We should at least act like one!"

Vulpix's fur bristled slightly and, without thinking things through, she found herself saying, "I think Streya is right." Her voice was as quiet as always, but it contained a biting tone that Vulpix had never used before. "You're just jealous I'm talking to someone else other than just yourself. Back off, won't you?"

Bulbasaur looked at his partner closely as he took a stunned step back, as if he was searching for something out of the ordinary that might explain Vulpix's behavior. Less assertively than before, he spoke up once again. "Vulpix, I've noticed that your necklace has been growing. I wanted to wait until you wanted to tell me about it, like you waited for me to talk about my parents… But maybe our trust isn't as mutual as I was thinking. Well, if you still don't want to talk about it, fine. I'll leave you two to your training."

Upon seeing the disappointment in Bulbasaur's eyes, Vulpix immediately relented. "Bulbasaur, I-"

If Bulbasaur heard her, he didn't show it. He turned and quickly exited the room.

"Ah, forget him," Streya said. "He's being a jerk, and you know it. You need your space."

"Yeah," Vulpix agreed immediately, though some part of her conscience squirmed uncomfortably within her. But she didn't like her conscience; she wanted to get her mind off of it as quickly as possible. She didn't need to be sorry for what she'd said. *I mean, I do need my space, as Streya says. Bulbasaur is the one who's out of line.*

Her logic didn't chase the guilt away. "Let's battle some more," she quickly suggested before tackling Streya without a moment's hesitation.

An almost vicious, triumphant gleam lit the sneasel's eyes as she took the hit.

When Vulpix silently arose from her bed of straw and grass, she felt almost in a daze. She attributed that to her sleepiness. She watched Bulbasaur's bulb rise and fall calmly as he slept on, and for a moment wanted to lay back down and fall back asleep.

She suddenly felt the ice at her neck, though, and realized she couldn't relax. The collar of ice felt thicker and more solid than ever.

I've got to find out what's up with it, and Streya might be the only one who can tell me! she thought as she hurried quietly out of the room. *And maybe… I wonder if this'll finally reveal something about who I am, and where I come from, and why I'm a pokémon and not a human!*

As she climbed the steep slope of the exit tunnel, the warm wind of outside greeted her. It chilled her for some reason, though she could

tell it should've been a regular spring evening. She wondered if maybe-

"Goin' somewhere?"

Vulpix jumped halfway into the air as she emerged onto the rocky plain of the outside. Standing right next to her, just at the side of the entrance, was Charmeleon. He had a rather annoyed scowl on his face as he glared at Vulpix.

To her own surprise, Vulpix found herself glaring right back at him. "Does it matter if I *am* going somewhere? I didn't even think you did guard duty. What are *you* doing here, then?"

Charmeleon's eyes widened a bit, showing that Vulpix wasn't the only one surprised at her own assertive behavior. "Some brat of a pokémon called me out on a debt, so I took this shift to pay him back." He let out a puff of smoke. "Anyway, your sneasel friend went off that way."

Vulpix didn't wait around. She hurried off in the direction that Charmeleon had pointed out until she stumbled upon a sort of small depression in the land, like a little valley surrounded by rocky hills. She would've gone in and out of the other side of it without another thought, but a shadow suddenly stepped out from the darkness when she reached its center.

"Glad you could make it," Streya said, her body almost invisible in the shadows. "So, you're sure you want to hear this? It might come as a bit of a shock."

Vulpix nodded.

Streya smiled. If they'd been somewhere with better light, or if Vulpix had been fully awake, or if she hadn't had so much on her mind, she might've seen the malicious expression that accompanied the smile; as it was, she saw only the sneasel's sharp white fangs as her mouth tilted upwards.

"Okay, so here's the thing," Streya said as she stepped up to Vulpix's side, putting an arm companionably around the vulpix's shoulders. A chill went through Vulpix as Streya continued, "That nevermeltice of yours is a symbol of the Lord of Ice. He's a great, powerful pokémon who promises to bring balance to the land, which has been out of balance for so many years. I've never even met him, but there are tons of us who are loyal to him. They even say that he's the reason the ice has been advancing on the land… And I've gotta admit, I believe the rumors. From what I can figure, he's powerful. Really powerful."

Vulpix didn't notice as Streya's suddenly ice-coated claw touched her collar, causing it to grow slowly. She was entranced by the sneasel's words as she continued, "But you're something special. Nevermeltice is still nevermeltice, symbol or no. Your necklace is something more than that. I have a feeling that you're something special to the Lord of Ice, and he must be wanting to see you again. But you've lost your memory, so of course you couldn't return to him. But I can help you back to him, and he'll explain everything - who you are, and what you are to him. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

Vulpix's eyes were half-closed now; her neck was almost entirely encased in ice. "Yeah… Wonderful…" she mimicked without much thought.

"We can leave right now," Streya said. "So shall we go? I'll lead the way and-"

A vine emerged from the darkness and entwined itself around Streya's icy claw; before she could react, the sneasel was slammed to the ground some feet away from Vulpix.

"That's quite enough!" Bulbasaur said as he stepped out of the darkness, standing atop the ridge of the mini valley. "What've you done to Vulpix?"

Streya sneered. "I haven't done anything. Have I, Vulpix?"

Vulpix shook her head without really comprehending the question.

"You see?" Streya said as she swiped at the vines that still encased one claw. Bulbasaur withdrew his vines before he could be injured, but he kept them raised and at the ready as the sneasel continued, "So just back off already. Vulpix wants to come with me to find out where she really comes from, which is more than you've been able to do for her."

Bulbasaur gritted his teeth. "I'm not letting her go anywhere with you!"

"And you think you can stop me?"

The sneasel suddenly became a shadow zipping through the darkness, approaching Bulbasaur with her claws shrouded in ice that glistened in the starlight. Bulbasaur simply stood his ground and waited, preparing neither to attack nor defend.

Just before the sneasel could hit her target, she was blasted by a powerful jet of fire that lit up the night and sent her careening into the side of the tiny, rocky valley.

"I still can't believe I'm helping you brats with this," Charmeleon said as he stepped up on the other side of the ridge, just above where Vulpix was.

Before Streya could recover, Bulbasaur was pelting her with razor-sharp leaves, forcing her to retreat up onto the ridge as far away from the two of them as she could get.

"You want a battle?" Streya said. "Then I'll give you a battle!"

She shot an ice beam Charmeleon's way, and the charmeleon did his best to block the sudden attack with his arms; one of his clawed hands ended up covered in ice, but he seemed mostly uninjured by the attack as a whole.

He blew out an arrogant puff of smoke at the ground. "Impressive, but not nearly good enough, you little punk!"

Fire sprouted at Charmeleon's claws as he dashed forward, immediately melting the ice that encased his hand. Intending to use her speed to her advantage, Sneasel turned to run away until a good opportunity to attack presented itself. However, a well-placed vine on Bulbasaur's part tripped her. She didn't have time to get up before the flaming ivory of the charmeleon's claws ripped into her back, opening shallow but painful gashes.

When the sneasel finally escaped the charmeleon's onslaught, she glared back at her two attackers. "That vulpix doesn't belong here! Let her come with me, or you'll regret it in the end!"

"You still want to fight, claws-for-brains?" Charmeleon goaded, taking a step towards her.

Streya took a couple steps back in response. "I know when I'm outmatched. But when all this comes back to bite you on the butt, don't come crying to me!" She suddenly turned and sprinted farther into the darkness.

Charmeleon started after her, but Bulbasaur called out, "Just let her go! I don't want to see that sneasel ever again. I'm glad to be rid of her. More importantly, I need you to help Vulpix!"

Bulbasaur was already running down the slope of the little valley as Charmeleon responded, "And what do you expect me to do? She seems pretty messed up, if I'm any judge of things. Besides, I think I've paid you back for saving my skin while fighting that scyther."

"Charmeleon, please!" Bulbasaur said as he finally reached Vulpix's side; she stared blankly at what happened around her, apparently ignorant of the previous battle and the current conversation. "If she didn't listen to me before now, I don't think there's anything I can do. But if an ice-type made her necklace this way, then a fire-type ought to be able to put it back to normal, right?"

Charmeleon suddenly perked up and hurried down to Bulbasaur and Vulpix. "So you're giving me free reign to blast your little friend with fire?"

Bulbasaur made an ugly face. "I wish not, but that's the only way I can see to fix this."

The charmeleon grinned. "One flamethrower coming up. Might wanna step back if you don't wanna get burned."

Bulbasaur backed off and, in another moment, he was nearly blinded as he watched flames pour from Charmeleon's mouth onto his partner. However, the flames weren't so destructive as he might've thought, coming from Charmeleon; Charmeleon kept them hot but focused as narrowly as possible on the necklace, with only a little overflow onto Vulpix's mostly heat-resistant fur.

At first, the vulpix literally just stood there, apparently oblivious to the fire. But as Bulbasaur watched the icy necklace beginning to melt, he saw her blink and look around for a moment, as if confused; and then, as the necklace finally dwindled to its original, nearly invisibly small cord, Vulpix finally came fully back to her senses. With a yelp, she leapt aside and out of the flames.

"Huh. You oughta be thanking me, not running from me, you little brat," Charmeleon said as Vulpix looked around her, confused. "Ungrateful little spitfire. Anyway, I'll be going. *Some* pokémon like to sleep, after all."

As he climbed up the rocky slope and disappeared from sight, Vulpix turned to Bulbasaur as she touched a paw to the raw, somewhat burned skin of her neck. "Um… Bulbasaur? What exactly are we doing here? What's going on?"

"You don't remember?"

Vulpix thought hard, and suddenly memories came to her; the ones of tonight were so dreamlike that she at first didn't believe them, and

the rest seemed to have happened long ago, making them difficult to call to mind.

Even so, it didn't take long for Vulpix to piece back together the events of the last week or so. Shame filled her as she looked to Bulbasaur and said, "Did I really tell you to back off?"

Bulbasaur came up closer to her and smiled. "Don't worry about it! I'm just glad you're back to normal!"

She was too horrified to accept it just like that. "Bulbasaur, I'm so so *so* sorry," she said quietly. "I just… I don't know. I don't even know what I was thinking. At first Streya just seemed really nice, and then… I don't know. It's just…"

"It's not your fault! Really, don't beat yourself up over it," Bulbasaur said. "She was manipulating you somehow, I could tell. Through your necklace."

Vulpix touched a paw to the icy pendant again. Though Charmeleon's flames had reduced the size of the necklace, the cord was still there, keeping the nevermeltice ever in place. "Streya said it was a symbol of some powerful pokémon… Someone called the Lord of Ice," she said as she struggled to remember the events of the night. "I don't know if she was lying or not, though. I just… I'm so sorry. Bulbasaur, really. You've always been so nice to me, and I-"

"Don't worry about it!" Bulbasaur insisted. "Besides, no matter how much I hate her, that sneasel was right in one respect. You should talk to more pokémon other than me. Honestly, I'm worried that at this rate, you'll never learn to talk to other pokémon. So I almost can't blame you on that matter. And everything else wasn't your fault, so I can't blame you for that, either."

Vulpix simply looked down at the ground, unable to accept Bulbasaur's forgiveness. Her thoughts were tumbling about in her head like leaves caught in a storm, and she could barely pin one down by the time another one hit her with such a force that it stung.

Where is it that I really come from, that Streya would be able to do something like that to me? Manipulate the necklace like that… No other pokémon I've met knew how to do that. And what did it do to me, really? I became… Oh, I don't even want to think about it. I was terrible. And this Lord of Ice… It sounds an awful lot like the Cold One that Venomoth freaked out about when we visited Bulbasaur's old home. What exactly am I involved in?

"Vulpix?" Bulbasaur questioned.

Vulpix did her best to snap herself out of her thoughts. "Yes?"

"I know I said it already, but I'm just glad you're back to normal," Bulbasaur said. "You had me worried, and, well, honestly, I don't know what I'd do if I wasn't partners with you anymore. I like being a part of Team Rebirth, but only so long as you're the other part."

Vulpix was about to apologize again, but Bulbasaur suddenly shouted out, "Hey, look at the sky!"

Confused and curious, Vulpix looked up. Lights of every color were dancing high in the sky, sliding along like rivers of living radiance. The flickering light illuminated the dark depression in the land that they stood in, making their surroundings much less gloomy than before.

"Wow," Bulbasaur said as he stared up at the sky. "That's gotta be the aurora! I didn't know it could be seen this far south! How cool!"

"Yeah," Vulpix agreed as she watched the light show, though her heart wasn't really in it. A new thought had occurred to her, filling her with more dread.

And what if the person I was before - the sort of person who would be involved with Streya and that "Lord of Ice," if he exists - what if that person wouldn't like who I am now? Which one is the real me anymore? What if-

"I think this is a sign, Vulpix," Bulbasaur said. "We just need to be hopeful. You're back to normal, that sneasel is gone, and everything can go back to normal now."

Vulpix looked over to Bulbasaur with surprise, as if everything he'd been saying over the last few minutes was finally sinking in. And, before she knew it, the slightest of smiles had grown on her face.

Bulbasaur's right. Hopefully… I just have to hope everything will turn out okay.

Sorry I didn't get a chapter out last week! School's been rough. It's lightening up a bit now, but it was still tough to get this finished (barely) on time for this week. I'm also finding out that I do NOT function well on consistently low sleep, thanks to my job… So even though I don't necessarily have less time to write, I have less time that I can write well and enjoy it to any extent. It loses absolutely all value to me when I'm exhausted… which is often. I apologize.

Anyway, a couple more things. Firstly, I'm realizing how logistically difficult it might be to combine three limited 3rd person point of views into one chapter, when the three humans inevitably meet, which is coming up rather soon… I think I've nearly got it figured out… Maybe…

And thing number two: KYUREM FORMS? BLACK AND WHITE 2! What is this madness? I was supposed to have another few solid months before all this started coming out! I'm not complaining by any means, but it'll be interesting to see how some aspects from this end up tying into the new facts that are bound to show up about some of the legendaries. After all, have I mentioned that this is a GenV-inspired fic? A.k.a. lots of fifth gen legendaries in myth and in reality? So yeah… However, do note that I already have this thing all plotted out, and the chances of me changing anything are small unless something comes up that would just work perfectly if I come up with a new plot branch. I'll let you know if anything ever deviates from my

original plans, but for now, everything's on track as I originally planned.

Team Misfits

Chapter Eleven: Team Misfits

"Nooooo! Isola, go back! Please?"

"Quit your whining, Cody! We're already more than halfway there and you've been whining this *entire time* !" Lisa said as she held him by the tail to keep him from jumping off Isola's back and running back the way they'd come.

"But this is ridiculous!" Cody objected as Isola continued ever northward along the rocky coast as the gentle rhythm of the waves lent a sort of natural music to their journey. "You all are supposed to be helping me. We finally know of another human for sure, and you're dragging me off on some other lousy thing that you won't even tell me about? That's it! I'm quitting the team!"

"But we *are* helping you, you zigzag-brained moron," Lisa said. "I finally went to the trouble of actually having a good idea for where we could go to find out something about your lunatic idea that you're human, and then that stupid little archen shows up and makes you not appreciate all my hard work! We are *going* to Tide-Battered Beach, whether you like it or not!"

"You both really could calm down, you know," Ryan spoke up.

Cody listened to an extent and stopped his struggling, and Lisa eventually let go of his tail. "Yes, but *why* are we going to Tide-Battered Beach?" he asked. "What exactly is this good idea of yours? Because knowing you, it's an idea, but the quality of it is not necessarily-"

He was interrupted as the kangaskhan's tail smacked him in the nose. "My good idea, I'll have you know, was to ask Guildmaster

Elgyem if he knew of anyone who might know about humans. And he did. But if I told you now, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

"I don't want it to be a surprise," Cody grumbled. "I just wanna go talk to that archen, Max. Why can't we talk to your mystery pokémon later?"

Ryan playfully tickled Cody's nose with his tail, shaking dust off and causing Cody to sneeze. "We'll be seeing Max soon anyway, probably," Ryan said. "The Solstice Games are coming up in just about a week. And there's no way that vain Guildmaster Braviary would leave behind anyone he could brag about."

Cody sighed. He didn't know many of the specifics of the Solstice Games - most of what he'd heard was hype without explanaton - but he didn't think it was going to help him. "But think about how many other pokémon will be trying to talk to him there. He's practically a celebrity, after all," Cody whined. "I want to go see him *now* ."

"You sound like such a girl," Ryan teased.

" *Excuse me?* " Lisa said. "He sounds like such a *girl* ? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, you know. He's just being so whiny about not seeing someone. Something like this." Then, in an overly-feminine voice, he said, "Oh, I wish only to see my love! My dear Max, you beautiful archen-human! I cannot stand to be separated from you for even a week!"

Ryan had barely finished when a smack of Lisa's tail sent both him and Cody flying off of Isola's back. Isola promptly came to a stop, looking with concern back at her fallen teammates.

"What was that for?" Ryan asked, rubbing the shoulder he had landed on.

"If you guys are such… *guys*, then you can be 'mon enough to give poor Isola a break!" Lisa shouted back at them. "Have fun walking on

foot! Come on, Isola, let's keep going."

"But they're really not that heavy," Isola argued. "And I carry all three of you all the time."

"Don't argue! Let's just go!" Lisa said.

Isola cast an apologetic glance back to Cody and Ryan, then set off at a walk with Lisa still on her back.

"The nerve!" Ryan said at his normal voice level. Isola and Lisa were already too far away to hear him, thanks to the sound of the waves to their right partially covering up his voice.

Cody started plodding forward slowly. "I don't even want to be on this little mission of Lisa's, and now I've got to *walk* all the way there? And this isn't even a fun place to walk… Ugh, guess it's Barren Seaside for a reason. It's so rocky and hard on the paws…"

Ryan followed right behind Cody. "You know, we could turn around and head back right now. Just to spite her."

For a moment, both of the furry friends dreamed about the possibility. Then, simultaneously, they sighed and said, "She'd kill us."

They stopped walking, looked at each other, and suddenly broke into laughter.

"Hey, pick up the pace or we'll leave you behind!" Lisa shouted back at them when she saw them practically paralyzed with laughter.

Breathless, the two pokémon got to their feet again and started walking. But both were in much better moods now.

"You know what?" Ryan said. "Forget them. If we're gonna get kicked off for being guys, let's talk guy stuff as we walk. I've been wanting to have a good, long, 'mon-to-'mon chat with you anyway.

Well, I guess it's more 'mon-to-man, technically, on the off chance that you really *are* a human."

Cody was in such a good mood that he didn't even mind the skepticism at the moment. "Oh, yeah? And what sort of guy talk did you have in mind?"

"Here's the thing," Ryan said, lowering his voice as if he were about to divulge a deep secret. "You're the real male heartthrob of this group, make no mistake about it."

Cody looked at the minccino, amused. "You sure you didn't hit your head when we fell off?"

"I'm serious, Cody!" Ryan said, though his tone said differently. "I mean, look at me. I'm a mess. But you, on the other hand - neatly-groomed fur, naivety that no girl can help but fall for, and… Oh, and your zigzagging patterns makes you look quite *sharp*, if you know what I mean."

"I can't deny that you have a *point* there," Cody said, laughing.

Ryan puffed out his fur a bit, as if proud to be teaching his protégé the ways of the world. "So, here's the point. You've already got Isola falling for you, and-"

"Wait, what?"

"You didn't know?" Ryan said with a smile. "My poor, ignorant friend. It's quite obvious that she's… Well, not quite *infatuated*, per se, but quite fond of you."

Cody looked at Ryan blankly. "I can't tell if you're joking now or being serious. Me and her are different species, so how does that even work?"

"What do you mean?" Ryan said. "I mean, you're not gonna be *mating* or anything, that's just silly. But a pokémon can still love

another pokémon regardless of that. Sheesh. What do humans think love is?"

The tip of Cody's tail burned with embarrassment. "I dunno… Honestly, some people think that 'I love you' is the same thing as saying 'I wanna have your babies'… Then again, we don't actually have the whole issue of there being other intelligent species around, so… yeah."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Humans. I'll never understand 'em. *Anyway*, back to my point. Isola might already like you, but if you really want her to fall for you, then you've gotta have some techniques to impress her, right? Show her some moves."

"What sort of 'moves' do you have in mind?"

"Well, just look at what you know now," Ryan said. "Tackle, headbutt, sand attack… That's it. Pretty much *anything* is better than that."

"Oh, you mean *those* kind of moves," Cody chuckled.

"This is no laughing matter, my ziggyzaggy friend," Ryan said with over-exaggerated seriousness. "Before you know it, she'll lose all interest in you, and you'll end up some lonely old pokémon with no one to spend your days with."

Cody nudged Ryan in the side as they walked and said, "And you're the master of this 'getting girls to fall for you' thing, right? You may not be strong, but you've got a wide array of moves… But not a single lover. So how's that working out for you?"

"Ah, but you see, my one and only love is already a captive of my charms," Ryan said with a twinkle in his eye. "She just doesn't know it yet."

"And who's that?"

Ryan looked at Cody skeptically. "You really don't have a guess? *Really* ?"

Cody thought about it for a moment, then gaped as he realized. "You mean *Lisa* ?"

"Of course," Ryan said. "Isn't it obvious? I swear that every pokémon in the guild already knows it."

"You two are constantly fighting, though," Cody said.

"You really are completely oblivious when it comes to matters of love, aren't you?" Ryan asked. "Surely it's not so different for humans - or, in your case, crazy pokémon who think that they're humans - that you couldn't see that I like her? Why else would I mess with her all the time, knowing that she'll kick my butt for it?"

Again Cody felt like the tip of his tail was on fire with embarrassment. "Well, I didn't exactly even ever have a girlfriend as a human," Cody said. "And I was homeschooled, so I wasn't around people as much as other teens… Which isn't to say I wasn't around girls at all or anything! But I jut didn't get out as much as I could've, you know."

"Cody." Ryan said. "I knew you were a dope, but I didn't realize it was to this extent. Well, good thing you've got me! Isola will be beak over talons for you in no time, if you're under my tutelage."

"All right, so what do you have in mind?" Cody said. "I'm still not quite sure if I believe you, but I could do with some new moves… I mean, remember that cofagrigus? Even if I'd been in a fair fight with him, my attacks would've just passed through him. I need to be able to defend myself."

"That's the spirit! Well, sort of," the minccino said, slapping his tail against the ground. "Well, you've seen my attacks. Water pulse, dig, double team… The list goes on. Pick your poison. And I mean that literally in addition to figuratively, by the way; I literally know toxic. Or there's iron tail, fake tears-"

"Thunderbolt," Cody interrupted. "It's such a cool attack."

"An excellent choice, my young trainee, and one that you can definitely use," Ryan said. "Watch and learn."

There wasn't much to see that Cody hadn't seen before; Ryan puffed out his fur a bit, electricity sparked, and faster than Cody's eye could follow a lightningbolt had arced from the minccino to the barren ground some distance ahead of them.

"You'll have it easier than I had it when learning, I bet," Ryan said as he unsuccessfully smoothed his matted fur back down. "You keep your fur nice and clean, so it'll hold static electricity better. That's what it's all about for us furred, non-electric types - the static. Go ahead, give it a try."

Cody looked at Ryan incredulously. "What do you mean, give it a try? That's no explanation!"

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Well, it would be for any other pokémon. I keep on forgetting it's you I'm talking to… You don't know the first thing about any of this!"

"I know, I know! No need to rub it in my face!"

Ryan smiled. "Hmm… How do I explain it? You're channeling the static electricity, but the real power comes from somewhere else. Somewhere inside you. Understand?"

"Uh… No. Not at all," Cody said. "Can you be more specific? It just sounds silly the way you're putting it."

"In that case, then it's silly. There's just no other way to put it," Ryan said. "And if you're afraid of it being silly, then you'll never learn it. Just try it. Experiment. Whatever you've been in the past, you're one hundred percent zigzagoon now. The feeling should come naturally. At its core, it's probably the same as when you use a tackle or a headbutt or a sand-attack… The only difference is, those moves are

just so incredibly straightforward that you don't realize you're doing it."

"I don't know…"

Ryan smacked out with his tail playfully, but Cody had the presence of mind to dodge. "Just try it!" Ryan insisted.

"All right. Fine."

Cody closed his eyes as he continued to walk. *The feeling inside me when I headbutt or tackle or use a sand attack, huh? But I'm just-*

He was interrupted as he ran into a large boulder nose-first, which he found was very much like stubbing his toe when he'd been human, except worse.

"Ow!" he said as he stopped and gingerly rubbed his nose. "Ryan! You could've warned me!"

"You looked like you were getting *so* into it, though," Ryan said with a mischievous grin. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"And you didn't think running into a rock would disturb me more?"

Ryan just shrugged and continued walking. After a moment, Cody grudgingly stopped rubbing his nose and sprinted a little to catch up.

"So why were you closing your eyes anyway?" Ryan asked.

"To concentrate," Cody said.

"Well, don't," Ryan said. "I told you; it should come naturally. Don't think about it too much. Just let it come. Besides, if you get into the habit of closing your eyes in order to do it, how are you going to aim?"

"Fine, let me try again."

Don't think about it… Just… do it? Well…

The zigzagoon's fur suddenly cackled with pent up electricity.

"Hey, there you go!" Ryan said. "Now just release it!"

Cody did just that, releasing it not-so-accidentally onto the closest target in sight: Ryan. The bolt, though weak, nonetheless had enough power to knock Ryan off his feet as electricity surged through his body.

"Oi, what was that for?" Ryan said as he got to his feet again, mostly uninjured. "I go to the trouble of teaching you my ways, and you shock me for it? Such ingratitude!"

Cody didn't reply, but his tail swished back and forth quickly in an unconscious wagging motion. *I did it! Even if it wasn't a lot… I finally did more than just tackle!*

Cody's happiness was infectious, and Ryan soon found himself smiling as well. "Anyway, not bad for your first try! It needs some work, of course, but you'll be reeling in Isola like a slowpoke catching a shelder. 'Course, my secret techniques for making any girl love you only works if you love her back. Do you?"

Shaking his head in automatic denial, Cody said, "No, I've never even thought about it! I mean, Ryan, I'm a human. If I have my way, I'll be going back to my world as soon as possible."

"Ah, Cody, Cody… My poor, oblivious friend. Not even aware of your own feelings, huh? Just like Lisa," Ryan said.

Cody smirked. "I think you just don't know what you're talking about. Sure, I like Isola, but that's because she's the only one on the team who doesn't pick on me and force me to do stuff that's stupid." *That's all it is. I'll miss her when I head back home, of course, but just because she's been nice. Falling in love with a pokémon would just be too weird.*

The minccino shrugged, a smile still on his face. "Suit yourself. You'll see what I mean in time, I'm sure. For now, though, why don't you keep on practicing?"

"Sounds good to me!" Cody said, still too excited by his new (albeit weak) technique to care too much about Ryan's all-too-apparent joking. Cody began his thunderbolt again and found that, just like the first time, it was actually really easy to do. Ryan hadn't been kidding when he said that the feeling was completely natural and instinctual.

However, as time passed, Cody found that he'd barely made any progress from the very basic thunderbolt he'd fired off first. Though the technique itself came rather naturally, the power that would eventually make it helpful did not.

The sun was sinking in the sky when Cody finally dropped to his stomach, dispirited. "This is useless," he said. "And my paws hurt from walking, and I'm tired, and-"

"Quit your whining," Ryan said good-naturedly. "The fact that you got anything on your first try was impressive. Maybe you're like me - a genius in array of techniques, if not in strength. Either way, it takes more than a couple hours of practice for anyone to master a move."

Cody moaned. "Regardless, my paws hurt… I never realized how nice it was to ride around on Isola to missions until now…"

As if in answer to his complaints, Cody caught sight of something up ahead, and realized that Isola and Lisa were trotting back over to them. As soon as they were in hearing range, Lisa shouted out, "You guys are taking forever! I think I've seen slugma move faster! Anyway, since I want to get there before the day is over, you guys can get back on if you promise to stop being so stupid!"

"You kidding? We don't need your pity help!" Ryan protested as Isola came up, folded her legs beneath her, and sat down so that they were all relatively closer to eye-level. "We're perfectly fine with-"

"Thank God!" Cody said as he leapt up from the ground and climbed on Isola's back. "My feet are killing me!"

Ryan shook his head disapprovingly, though a smile managed to peek through the mock seriousness as he too climbed onto Isola.

Isola got back to her feet and once again began her trail-blazing pace. "I'm glad that's finally all sorted out," she said as she ran, her jumpy demeanor causing her to turn her head every time a wave crashed against the shore. "And did I see someone learning how to use thunderbolt?"

Despite his sore paws, Cody immediately brightened. "You bet! But it's not all that good yet."

"You'll get it eventually," Isola encouraged. "I don't even know where I'd start with an attack like that… We doduo are known more for physical attacking. But I bet you'll be great at it in no time."

For some reason, Cody found himself much more cheered by Isola's positivity than by Ryan's insistence that he just needed to practice. *Probably just because I'm in a better mood now because I'm not walking,* Cody thought, dismissing the observation.

But Ryan saw Cody's mood change and smiled knowingly to himself as the team continued on.

Soon, the air became noticeably chillier, and Cody noticed that frost covered the barren ground. Within a few more minutes of Isola's running, the landscape completely transformed itself. Everything was covered in so much ice that Isola had to slow her pace just to keep on her feet, and the waves now bashed against the shore with such force that Cody would've sworn that they weren't natural.

"Oh, hey guys, disembark!" Lisa suddenly called out soon after this change of scenery had occurred. "We're here!"

Isola lowered herself to let them down as Ryan asked, "And exactly *where* is here? Who are we looking for?"

"This is Tide-Battered Beach, as you already know," Lisa said smugly. "My sort of rough-and-tumble place, if ya know what I mean. I like it. If you look past all the waves, you'll see that the beach isn't the only rough place around. The sea around here is filled with whirlpools. Supposedly, some are wider around than our guild is tall, and that's saying something."

"Those are all just exaggerated rumors," Ryan said. "Anyway, not that we don't all *love* the geography lesson, but can you get to the point?"

"I'm getting there, fluffball!" Lisa said. "There's a pokémon by the name of Lapras who apparently likes to ride those waves and whirlpools around here. Word is that he's a world traveler who's seen a lot, and the guildmaster thought he'd heard tell of human stories that originated from him. So keep your eyes peeled!"

"Um, I think he's right over there," Isola said as she looked out to see.

All three of the shorter pokémon looked out to sea, but saw nothing. "Really?" Cody asked. "Where?"

"Here," Isola said, lowering her head so that Cody could jump on. After some hesitation, Cody managed to get his feet on top of the doduo's head without getting his paws in her face, and she in turn raised her head up so that Cody could look out.

Though his eyes weren't so good as Isola's, Cody managed to make out the shape of a Lapras as it emerged from the rim of a whirlpool; unlike many other pokémon, lapras was a species that Cody actually recognized. The reddish light of the setting sun made it difficult to say for sure if it was the pokémon they were looking for, but then again, the body shape of the large pokémon was pretty distinctive.

And, as he watched, Cody thought he saw the Lapras looking at them. Though maybe he imagined it, he nonetheless thought he'd try to get its attention. He adjusted his position on Isola's head, then stood up on his hind legs and waved his short forelegs as widely as he could manage. However, the strong winds that came from the churning sea quickly set him off balance, and he tumbled to the icy ground.

Ryan and Lisa immediately broke out laughing.

"You okay?" Isola asked.

Cody grumbled something unintelligible in response while glaring murderously over at young kangaskhan and scruffy minccino.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, it looks like you got his attention," Isola said as she turned back to look at the ocean. "He's coming this way now."

The large, graceful, almost dinosaur-like pokémon coasted easily over the waves towards the group, eventually beaching himself on the shore just in front of them.

In a deep, flowing voice, he said, "Am I correct in assuming that you four wished to speak to me?"

"You bet!" Lisa said before Cody could speak up. "Your wave-riding was awesome! I didn't even know there were water pokémon that could navigate the sea around here. I hear that even the air is so twisted that even birds can't fly above it!"

Lapras smiled, amused by Lisa's enthusiasm. "Let's just say that I've surfed much stranger seas before… Though these whirlpools still give me trouble. I don't dare go very far past the outermost whirlpools."

"That's still insane," Lisa said. "Hey, I bet you're a great battler, too! What do you say we-"

The kangaskhan was cut off as Ryan suddenly tackled her. "That's not what we came here to talk about, Lisa!" Ryan said.

One of their daily scuffles quickly broke out, leaving both Cody and Isola embarrassed as the older pokémon watched the fight.

"Sorry about them," Isola apologized, flinching every time Lisa or Ryan landed an attack on the other. "They do this a lot."

"I see," the lapras said, still amused. "By the way, I'm Lapras," the pokémon said. "And you are…?"

"Team Misfits," Isola answered despite her continued fidgeting at the battle. "I'm Doduo, and this is Cody. Cody had something he wanted to ask you. Right, Cody?"

"Yes!" Cody said, finally glad for a chance to speak. "Lapras, we heard that you might know something about humans? I've been, uh, interested in them lately, so I'm trying to find out all I can."

Lapras smiled, apparently unperturbed by what would usually be seen as an odd question. "I don't get requests to hear about humans much," Lapras said. "Normally pokémon come to me to hear about the lands that lie beyond the ocean… But I assure you, my human stories are much more interesting. I can't say I know much about humans themselves, but I did know a human once."

"Really?" Cody asked.

"Really," Lapras confirmed. "Of course, she wasn't much of a human when I knew her; as far as I could tell, she was a normal squirtle. She'd travelled back in time with a trusted pokémon partner of hers in order to save their future, but there was an accident and she ended up losing both her memories and her human form."

"But you're saying she already lived in this world in the future? How is that possible?" Cody asked. *I mean, I didn't travel back in time to*

get here, did I? And I wasn't here before I woke up in Sprawling Shallows, was I?

Lapras looked out to sea reflectively, though by now the grey of twilight was all there was to see by. "You know, I'm not sure. I never thought to ask," Lapras said. "She did indeed live in the future of this world before coming back in time, but how she got there originally is beyond my understanding. The future she came from was quite bleak and distorted; perhaps it was so altered that she somehow managed to appear in our world. Either way, if she hadn't been around, the entire world would be lost by now. She, her partner from the future, and a partner she made in this present - her past - managed to stop time itself from halting, thus keeping the world from being plunged into eternal darkness."

"Wow… Big footprints to fill…" Cody mumbled to himself.

"So, um, what do you think of the news of a human turned into a pokémon at the Southern Guild?" Isola ventured to ask just as Lisa and Ryan were returning.

Lapras tilted his head. "I hadn't heard anything about it."

"At the Southern Guild, there's this archen who's claiming to be a human," Ryan explained, having heard Isola's question as he walked up. "I wouldn't believe it at all, but he's somehow able to make pokémon around him evolve, or so it seems."

"If he's indeed a human, than helping others to evolve doesn't surprise me," Lapras said. "Most of what I'm about to say is speculation based on mythology and observations of the human I knew those many years ago, but… Well, you see, our myths often associate humans with disaster and evil. We tell hatchlings stories about humans to keep them from wandering off from the nest, and warn youngster that if they don't behave, humans will get them. But I don't think it's because humans are inherently evil. In fact, I know that can't be it. That human-turned-squirtle proved, if anything,

exactly the opposite. She was willing to sacrifice her own existence in order to save our world.

"Instead, I think humans have a great inner strength that we pokémon can't quite understand. And I think it's a strength that can help to unlock our own power. That squirtle's partners never would have been as strong as they were without her being there to encourage them, that much I know. No doubt, this archen-human with pokémon evolving around him is unconsciously unlocking other pokémon's power. But…"

"But what?" Cody asked when Lapras trailed off.

"If a human has appeared in this land, then I fear for what events are yet to come," Lapras said. "Especially considering everything else that has been going wrong recently. From what I understand from the pokémon I've talked to, the Spirit of this land is rooted in balance; if that balance is being upset, then I don't wish to think about what might happen. The ice creeping southward is an example of that upset balance, and the tides speak of trouble that is much more deeply seeded in the very essence of the land. The lack of evolutions is something that happened to my native land in the months before the human saved us. Perhaps the appearance of a human here is the final sign that something terrible might be about to happen."

"Woah," Cody said, hardly able to wrap his mind around this. *My presence here might be setting the world off balance? Or, no, that's not how he put it… Because the world is off balance, maybe that's why I'm here. But maybe Lapras is over generalizing. I can't really be expected to have to try to save the world, can I?*

"Cody?" Isola asked tentatively, looking concerned. "You okay?"

"Oh, um, yeah," he said. "That's just different than what I was expecting to hear, I guess."

Lapras tilted his head, puzzled. "Is there perhaps more to your curiosity than meets the eye… Cody, was it? Odd that you'd go by your personal name even on first meeting me… The human that I knew did the same thing."

"Oh, good call," Lisa said nonchalantly. "Cody's actually a human. Or, at least, he claims to be."

Cody spun and faced her, his fur bristling. "I thought we agreed that that was going to stay a secret! Otherwise I'll have *everyone* calling me crazy, not just you guys!"

"Lapras had obviously guessed it already, though," Lisa said. "No need to be so touchy about it."

"If it helps at all, I promise that your secret is safe with me," Lapras said. "And I don't think you're crazy. However, the fact that there are two humans here worries me further… Tell me, do you remember how or why you came here?"

Cody shook his head. "I remember everything about my life as a human, I think. The last thing I remember is dying, and then I woke up here."

Before Lapras could respond, Ryan suddenly jumped in front of the zigzagoon and, looking him in the eyes, said, "Wait, wait. You *died* ? You didn't tell us that!"

"Yeah, what gives?" Lisa said.

"I didn't remember it until a bit later after you found me that first day," Cody defended himself. "And since you all were already making fun of me for being crazy, I didn't want to add fuel to the fire."

"Hmph. You still shoulda told us," Lisa complained.

Before Cody could reply, the earth began to shake with such force that he and the rest of his team were thrown off their feet; Cody

managed to hit his head against a nearby ice-covered rock. Stars danced in front of his eyes as he tried unsuccessfully to rise to his feet again.

"An earthquake?" Isola squawked with surprise.

"I've never felt one this strong before!" Lapras said as he sat on the ground, his broad base keeping him from falling over. "This is incredible!"

It was strong enough that soon, Ryan, Cody, and Lisa all found that they couldn't even stay in one place; they didn't have enough body mass to stay on the ground. Cody ended up with increasingly large waves breaking over his head as the shaking brought him closer and closer to the ocean. Though being half-submerged helped to muffle the shaking some, he was barely able to keep his head above the churning waves.

The shaking kept at full force for maybe a minute before finally dying down enough that Cody was able to pull himself back onto solid ground, half choking on the salt water that had entered his lungs.

"Cody!" Isola exclaimed as the ground completely stabilized, allowing her to run over to him. It seemed that, though everyone else was a bit bruised and shaken, his falling into the waves had left him the worst off.

"I'll be fine," he said between coughs. "But… Was that natural? It almost felt-" he coughed, "like an earthquake attack, don't you think?"

"But it was too widespread to be that," Ryan commented as he looked down the coastline, seeing pokémon here and there as they emerged from rocky dens. "No pokémon could manage an earthquake that strong and that large. Must've just been a freak of a natural earthquake."

Lapras suddenly spoke up, his voice deadly serious. "Grab onto my shell spikes, quickly, all of you," Lapras said. "A tidal wave is coming."

All four pokémon looked out to the ocean; the water looked a bit higher than normal in the now starlit night.

"But I don't see anything. You sure one's coming?" Ryan commented.

"Just trust me," Lapras said. "Hurry. We'll go as far out to sea as we can get and try to ride it out."

The team looked at each other and without another word they climbed onto the lapras's back.

Immobile though Lapras might have been on land, on the ocean he practically skimmed over the water, racing out as far away from the coast as he could manage.

"But why are we going towards it?" Isola asked as she looked with terror on the wave they were approaching, which - now that they were closer - seemed large enough to hide a wailord within it. "Shouldn't we-"

"The crest will get worse the shallower the water gets," Lapras said. "Now hold on tight! I don't think I'll be able to get all the way over it without some of it crashing down on us!"

All four pokémon grabbed on as tightly as they could. Isola held tightly with her claws and wrapped her neck around a spike for added support; Lisa and Ryan both wrapped their arms around the nearest spike.

Gosh darn it, I miss having arms and hands! Cody thought as he did the only thing he really could do. His paws were mostly useless for grabbing onto things, so he bit down on a spike, hoping that his jaw

strength would be enough. It had to be enough. He had no other option.

He held on tightly as he felt Lapras tip beneath him, rising with the wave. And though he couldn't see much thanks to his head's angle, he was able to brace himself right as the wave overtook them, sending gallons of water crashing down on their heads. For a moment, Cody thought the force would tear him from Lapras's back. But then it was over, and he let go of the spike in order to gasp for breath.

"Everyone okay back there?" Lapras said.

"A little wet, but all present!" Ryan responded for all of them.

"Good," Lapras said. "That was practice. The real test is the next one."

"What!" Cody said as he glanced around Lapras's neck to see a giant wall of water rising, coming closer and closer with each passing second. Lapras was speeding up as well, swimming as quickly as he could in order to be as far out to sea as possible when they hit.

Lisa whipped her tail against one of Lapras's back spikes, shaking the water off of it. "This stinks worse than a stunky battle," she said. "I have a great idea that ends up paying off, and then we have to get caught in a stupid earthquake…"

"Brace yourselves again!" Lapras said as he quickly rose up the side of the next, bigger wave. He needn't have spoken, though; all four pokémon on his back were holding on more tightly than ever.

This time, the initial force of the wave was just too much. Cody instinctively let go rather than have the teeth ripped out of his mouth by trying to hold on, but he immediately regretted that course of action as he felt himself pushed deep beneath the waves. Dazed, the breath left his lungs sooner than it needed to. The precious bubbles of life rose up as Cody felt his wet fur drag him further down.

He opened his eyes despite the sting of the salt and imagined that the sea was somewhat brighter in front of him, and he paddled forward as fast as his short legs could propel him.

As soon as his head breached the surface, he coughed and sputtered, struggling to get air into his waterlogged lungs as he treaded water. He heard the rest of the team calling out to him, but he was too busy trying to breathe to respond.

They must have heard his coughing, though, because their voices were getting closer. But they weren't getting closer quickly enough. He could feel the water that supported him rising again, and knew that the crest of the next wave would come soon.

"Take a deep breath and hold it!" Cody heard Lapras shout.

He did his best to do as he said, and immediately he felt water bearing him downwards again. The breath he took didn't do much good; he was still coughing up the water in his lungs, making him swallow even more water before he'd been under for even a few seconds.

But this wave was smaller, and in no time he found himself struggling at the surface again. Or maybe it hadn't been no time; maybe he'd passed out for a moment and simply didn't remember. It all seemed rather fuzzy.

What he did know for sure was the feeling as Lapras picked Cody up in his mouth and dropped the sodden zigzagoon back on his shell.

"Dear Zekrom and Reshiram above, Cody, can't you follow a simple direction like holding on?" Lisa yelled at him.

Cody coughed, unable to respond as he purged his lungs of water. In another moment, he felt Ryan's strong tail slam into his back which, though painful, actually helped him to spew out some of the salt water in his stomach.

"Eh, sorry about that, Lapras," Cody said weakly as they rose and fell, this time successfully riding atop the now smaller waves.

"Don't worry about it," Lapras said. "If anything, consider yourself lucky your not dead, and doubly lucky that *he* didn't see you."

"Wait, what? He?" Ryan said. "What are you talking about?"

Lapras looked back at them, his face illuminated by the stars above and their reflections below. "You all missed it. But as the waves were coming and the last shreds of daylight were fading, I saw a pokémon on a cloud dart across the sky, his eyes trained on us."

"Pokémon on a cloud?" Isola asked, her body shaking from cold and shock. "You don't mean… That earthquake was caused by Landorus?"

Lapras nodded. "In your legends, he's supposed to keep the world balanced by managing the weather and earth phenomena of the land, correct?"

"Yes, along with Thundorus and Tornadus," Isola said.

"I feared as much," Lapras said. "I don't know much about your land in particular, but I played a large role in the workings of my home land's legends… And the legends here seem to be waking to evil in the same way that my own master did. It's just a hunch - and my hunches are usually right - but I think Landorus used the earthquake to flush pokémon out, then went on the hunt for someone in particular. And I don't think it's unlikely that he was looking for you, Cody."

"Me? Why me?" Cody asked, his lungs finally clear of most of the water.

"Because you're a human," Lapras said. "What the specifics of Landorus's mission are I cannot say, but a human's presence in the world is never an insignificant happening. I think he was searching

for you in particular, or perhaps any human he might have come across."

Cody looked down at the waves that now lapped with relative calm against Lapras's side, unsure how to respond.

In the moment of silence, Cody suddenly found that the sea he was looking at had turned into a jumble of greens and pinks and yellows, darting across the ripples of the ocean like a thousand luminous snakes. Surprised, he and everyone else lifted their heads to the sky to see that the colors originated there, shining so brightly that the whole ocean seemed lit as if it was day again.

"Wow, an aurora!" Cody said, almost immediately forgetting his current dilemma as his natural 'zigzagoon eye for shiny things' completely distracted him. "I never got to see those at home!"

"Me neither!" said Ryan, almost as enthusiastically as the zigzagoon.

Lisa shrugged and said, "It's not that great," but she couldn't hide the look of awe on her face as she stared, transfixed on the lights.

Only Lapras and Isola seemed uninspired.

"It doesn't feel natural," Isola muttered.

"I agree," Lapras said. "I've never seen an aurora this bright anywhere in the world. The intensity and timing of it worries me. Might it be some strange disturbance due to Landorus's passing?"

As suddenly as they had come, the lights winked out of existence.

"Aw, spoilsports," Ryan said. "You hurt its feelings!"

Despite Ryan's obvious disappointment, Isola let out a sigh of relief as she looked up once again at the sky. "I think I like the stars better, anyway."

Cody looked back up at the comparatively dim sky and, to his surprise, he found himself answering, "You know, I think I agree."

Sorry! A day late… My bad! Again…

Anyway, I'm having so much fun with Team Misfits now. The Cody and Ryan dialogue was just fun to write. ^_^

And if I called Lapras a 'she' at all, please let me know! I was doing that this entire chapter, but according to Bulbapedia, the lapras from Time/Darkness/Sky is a guy… I just always see Lapras as a feminine pokémon, so… Yeah. Sorry about that.

Thanks for reading!

Max

Chapter Twelve: Max

"Nope. Not up here either," Max said as he finished his circuit around the base of the tree, leaning against the strong north wind to keep from being blown off the hilltop. "With the wind gusting like this, I wouldn't be surprised if that nidoran's wood sculpture blew away… But I guess I've just got to keep on looking."

He took a running start, then jumped off of the south side of the hill, wings flapping frantically as he tried to use the wind and height to aid his ongoing attempts at flight. His wings did an admirable job of catching the wind, and he managed to stay airborne for ten seconds before landing ungracefully on the steep slope of the hill below him.

He sighed, too used to his failure at flying to care too much. "At least this mission is finally giving me a chance to have some time to myself… Heh, never thought I'd be happy for the bore of a solo mission."

Enjoying the relative silence of Treetopped Hills, he slowly walked down the hill and continued onto the next one. He still loved hanging out with everyone at the guild, of course, but ever since everyone had found out he was human, he'd rarely had a moment to himself. Everyone wanted him to try to help them evolve, or tell them what it'd been like to be human… Neither of which he could really do. He had no idea if he'd actually made those pokémon evolve, and if he really had, he had no idea how he'd done it. And with only one far-from-average day of his life in his mind as a complete memory, he couldn't say much about what it was like to be human.

He reached the top of the next hill and circled the tree that stood tall and proud at the center of its crest. According to the nidoran's directions, he was in the right area to find the tree with the hollow

that held the forgotten carving; he just had to find the right tree. As before, there was no hollow in this tree.

Yet again, he launched himself off the top of the hill to practice his flying. He imagined that maybe he'd gone a little farther with that leap. But for the most part, it was still just that: a leap. No matter how hard he tried, his wings just couldn't manage much of anything that resembled flight.

"Hey there! Want some pointers?" a loud feminine voice called out from above, interrupting Max's peace and quiet. Not that he minded much. As much as he liked the quiet, he still liked company more. Curious, he looked up and caught sight of a pidgey right as the little bird landed lightly on his upraised beak.

Trying his best not to move his upper beak, he replied, "You mean pointers for my flying? I don't think you'll be able to help much. I've asked for help from others before, but it seems that archen wings just aren't made for flying."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong," the pidgey chirped. "Wings are inherently made for flying, whether they're archen wings or pidgey wings! Here, why don't you take off again, and I'll see where I can help." She hopped down from his beak and landed on the hillside next to him, watching expectantly.

Can't hurt to show her, I guess. He opened his wings, pushed off with his powerful legs, and flapped as hard as he could, managing to stay at the top of his arc of movement for only a few seconds before he fell back to the ground.

He got back up and turned to the pidgey, ruffling his head feathers embarrassedly. "So? What do you make of that?"

"Hm… Well, maybe you really *are* just groundbound," the pidgey said. "Still, I bet I could at least double your air time. For one, you're not spreading your feathers to the fullest."

Max looked down at a wing and stretched. "I'm not? Are you sure? I don't think you've ever been an archen, so I don't see how-"

Ignoring him, the pidgey hopped forward, propped his wing on her own, then bit down with her beak on his outermost flight feathers and pulled. To Max's surprise, he felt a muscle flexing that he hadn't really noticed before, nonetheless used. Up until now, he'd taken his two wing claws to be the only real parallels to hands he had in terms of anatomy, and he hadn't experimented much more with them since figuring out the basics of his movement; now, he realized that whatever this pidgey was pulling allowed his blue flight feathers to pivot somewhat, lengthening the span of his wings.

"Wow. How'd you realize that?" Max asked. *And it's my body… How'd I* not *realize it? Guess I'm too stuck on moving like a human as much as possible, even now.*

"Intuition," the pidgey said haughtily. "Your wings ought to be the same as mine, I figured, even if they're not made for any sort of great flying. You just looked out of whack flapping them with those blue feathers of yours trailing behind like useless streamers."

Max flexed the newfound muscle and, thinking he had the hang of it, he leapt up again. To his joy, he found that the pidgey hadn't been lying; it did nearly double his time in the air, not necessarily increasing his height at all but allowing him to fly farther.

The pidgey puffed out her feathers. "What'd I tell you? Who's the best flyer ever?"

"Uh… You?" Max guessed, even though his performance had more to do with her tips than her flying.

"Got that right, bud," she said. "I've been told I'm an absolute natural everywhere I go, and I've been travelling around a lot, so by everywhere I go, I actually mean *everywhere* . Now, try it again, but cup your feathers more this time. It's not what I'd normally suggest,

but you're so much of a land bird that you need to catch as much air as you can."

Max did as he was told. Though he had a bit more trouble getting this tip down perfectly, he found that it did help a bit, if only marginally. By now, though, he was at the bottom of the hill where he couldn't do much more practice without climbing up the hillside again.

"I'm Alexa, by the way," the pidgey said as she flew down to join him. "Ace flyer and well-traveled pidgey extraordinaire. You?"

"I'm Max. And thanks so much for the help," Max said sincerely, still somewhat in awe of how easily a couple pointers from this bird had helped him. "I've been trying to improve for a couple months now. You-"

"Hold up, there," Alexa interrupted him. "Max? The archen? You wouldn't- No, of course you are! Gosh, I'm stupid. Except not really, since I'm way too awesome to be stupid. Guess I got too caught up in your atrocious flying to notice who I'd found! You're Max the human, right?"

Normally Max would've gotten a bit sour right there, since he didn't much like people only caring about him because he was human. But considering how much Alexa had helped, he responded happily, "Yup, that's me! Were you looking for me?"

The pidgey flapped her wings excitedly. "You bet! I actually went by the guild first, and they told me I could find you out here in this place, and so I came here, and here you are! This is great! Ever since I heard about you - well, just trust me, I've been excited to talk to you!"

"Did you need to ask me about something?" Max questioned, confused by her enthusiasm; most other pokémon he spoke to weren't *this* psyched about meeting a human-turned-pokémon, even when they for sure believed it wasn't all an elaborate prank.

"Oh, yeah! First off, let me tell you that I'm actually a human, too!" Alexa said. "'Course, most pokémon think I'm crazy when I tell 'em that, and your guild did, too, but it's true!"

As much as Max could sympathize - quite a few pokémon still didn't believe that he himself was a pokémon, after all - he found himself a bit skeptical. "Not meaning to not believe you, but… Can you prove it? Do you remember anything you could tell me so I know for sure?"

"Sure, not a problem," Alexa said. "Firstly, I didn't have wings at all, which I now realize was quite a let down. Had hands, legs, skin… All that good stuff. Did you know pokémon here don't even know what we humans looked like? Anyway, I don't really remember anything that wasn't directly mentioned or thought of in my last day as a human… Or I guess it was my last day, at least. But I do know I lived in Unova, in Lacunosa Town. It was the crazy place surrounded by walls with no one willing to go outside at night."

Max's eyes widened as he realized that the only possible way she could know this would be if she was telling the truth. "No way! So you're not lying?"

"Of course not! Why would I make up something like that?" she asked. "I'm human! Or, at least, I was. Can't say I really wanna go back, seeing as I can't fly there! Too bad that you're a bird here and can't even fly… Maybe when you evolve, huh? I hear you're good at making pokémon evolve, so maybe you'll be able to, and then you'll be an archeops soaring across the sky! Anyway, where're you from? In our original world, I mean."

"Castelia City. But… Well, wow!" Max said, for once in his life struck speechless. After a moment, he continued, "I can't believe there's actually another human here! Do you have any idea how we got here? I can only remember one day of my life clearly, but I know it wasn't the last day I was there, so I don't know how all this happened."

The pidgey shrugged, which Max now saw looked just as odd as it usually felt for him, being a human in a bird's body. "I don't really know," Alexa said.

Max scowled. "But you said you remembered your last day there in our world, right? Why do you say it was your last day?"

She shrugged again, looking off at the nearest tree as its branches swayed wildly in the north wind that was chilly even on this sunny spring afternoon. "I dunno. It just felt like my last day, you know?"

The archen got the feeling that Alexa was avoiding the truth, but he decided not to press the matter. After all, he was still ecstatic that he'd even found another human at all. *Maybe I should've revealed I was human sooner after waking up in this world… What if more humans show up now that the news is out about me? That'd be great! Maybe we could figure something out!*

"Anyway, I'm not just here to chat!" Alexa said hastily, changing the topic. "I was wondering if you'd met any other humans here."

Max shook his head. "You're the first," Max said. "Up until now, I was just living my pokémon life, figuring I was alone and stuck here. If you don't mind me asking, do you really not want to go back?"

"Nope, I love being a pidgey too much!" Alexa insisted, emphasizing her point by opening her wings and taking a quick flight around Max. "Flight's totally my style, and it'd take a lot to make me want to give it up. Boring human life certainly isn't enough motivation! 'Course, you being not able to really fly, I can understand if you don't understand."

Max thought about it for a minute and realized that, honestly, he wasn't that anxious to get home. "I don't know. I do kind of like being a pokémon. I've made a lot of friends here, too, and I feel like I'm doing at least some good, when all I did was mess up as a human."

The pidgey let out a little chirrup of curiosity. "Mess up? Did you screw something up on the only day you can remember?"

"Uh… yeah. Pretty badly," he said, picking at the ground with his talons. "If I'd just done things differently…"

"What things?" Alexa asked when he trailed off.

Max shook his head. "I'm not telling unless you tell me about your last day."

Alexa puffed her chest feathers out indignantly. "Who said I wasn't telling? It was a boring day. That's it. A Saturday. Sunny. I hung out with friends, we went to a movie, had dinner at the food court in the mall, got some frozen yogurt at Berry Leaf… Man, that was good fro yo, that was. I'd almost go back to being a human just for that. But anyway, that's it for my last day. So, your story?"

Max still thought she was hiding something, so he felt rather justified when he said, "Sorry, but I'd really rather not talk about it. I will tell you that it was bad enough that when I showed up here, I thought that maybe I was here to make up for it. You know, like karmic rebirth or something."

Alexa looked a little annoyed at first, but she grudgingly accepted his refusal to talk. *Perhaps she doesn't mind because she feels guilty that she isn't telling her whole story, too*, Max thought.

There was an awkward pause. Eventually, Max suggested, "Well, I'm looking for a pokémon's old den at the base of one of these trees. He left a sculpture here that he wants back. Wanna keep talking as I keep looking?"

"And you're doing that *walking* ?" she asked. "Psh. Let me speed things up!" she promptly took off and flew to the nearest tree; apparently not finding anything there, she continued to the next tree, and the one after that.

Max didn't protest her offer for help as he trekked up another unchecked hill to continue with the search, slow in comparison

though he was. And since the work was far from mentally taxing, he let his mind wander.

I can't believe there's actually someone else here like me! So does that mean I'm not here to try to be brave, and make up for my mistakes? Hmm… No, she's still not saying something. What would she be trying to hide? Did she do something similar? She doesn't strike me as the kind of person to just let someone die, like I did… Then again, I probably don't come across like that, either. At least, I hope I don't.

The first hill he checked turned out fruitless. He started off to the next.

Still, this is incredible. Another human! Why are we here, really? I still think I need to use this opportunity to make up for my mistakes… But what if that's not the real reason I ended up here? Surely someone knows something about how we both wound up as pokémon in a world that doesn't even have humans. Didn't Alexa say-

"Found it!" Alexa said as she flew back, navigating the near calmer air between the hills as she carried the wood carving of a female nidoran in her talons.

Max caught the carving in his outstretched, almost arm-like wings. "Thanks," he said as the pidgey once again landed next to him. "Makes me wish I could fly… It'd certainly speed up missions like this. But oh well. Maybe I'll get my chance someday. Anyway, I was thinking about what you said earlier. You asked me if I'd met any other humans. Do you know for sure if there are more? Have *you* met any others?"

"Yep, I know of at least one more for sure!" Alexa chirruped. "I mean, I haven't seen him since I came here, but he was with me on that last day as a human, so I'm sure he wound up here just like I did. If you ever meet someone named Cecil, tell him Alexa is looking for him."

"How can you be sure he ended up here, too?"

Alexa tapped her beak with a wing knowingly. "Same way I'm such a good flier: intuition! He's here, I know it. I just haven't found him yet."

A huge gust of wind suddenly blew into the valley where the two birds were conversing, hitting them like a physical blow and knocking both of them to the ground.

As Max and Alexa got back to their feet, bracing themselves against the hurricane-like wind, they looked up to the sky and saw ominous clouds gathering where, previously, there'd been none in the dimming evening sky.

"Huh. Weird weather," Max said.

"What?" Alexa yelled back to him, unable to hear him over the roar of the wind as it continued to blow strongly through the hills.

"Weird weather!" Max repeated.

This time, Alexa nodded. "I don't like it! It's coming too fast - we should find shelter!"

"Where was the den?" the archen asked, thinking to himself that shelter was indeed a very good idea. The low clouds were already a solid ceiling that seemed supported by the swaying trees of the hilltops. Soon, even the reddish hue lent to the land by the soon-to-be-setting sun would disappear, leaving them in darkness.

"The den was this way!" she said as she took off. But before she could get even a foot in the air, her light body was tossed about by the wind, rendering her efforts to control her direction useless. She hit the ground with a pained chirp as the wind continued to drag her.

Max rushed over to her and caught one of her talons in his beak before her still spread wings could catch the air again get her caught

back up in the turbulence. After a moment where she still seemed dazed, she got a hold of herself enough to close her wings.

Max let go of her leg. "You okay?" he asked.

She nodded, though she seemed more rattled than she wanted to admit. "Come on. I'll just have to foot it, same as you," she said before hopping off, staying as low to the ground as possible. Max followed wordlessly, easily keeping up now that the pidgey was on foot. As he followed, he kept an eye on the sky grew darker and darker and the winds picked up even more.

A rumble of thunder suddenly shook the sky, shaking them to their bones. Except it wasn't thunder. Not exactly. There was no lightning for it to have come from, and even aside from that, it sounded more like a prolonged roar of the wind as it moved among the hills.

Max turned towards the sounds and saw a cloud descending towards them with a speed and solidness that made the archen know that it was more than it seemed.

"Duck!" he shouted, catching the smaller bird under his wing and sending both her and himself crashing to the ground. He acted not a moment too soon. As the cloud darted just above them, he saw a hand that was bigger than his whole body stretch from the side of the cloud, and he glimpsed the cold, yellow gaze of some massive pokémon as it glared at them.

The pokémon continued on, carried forward by its colossal momentum. But Max could see it slowing down, and didn't doubt that it'd be coming back again for another try.

"What was THAT?" Alexa asked as the two of them hurriedly got up.

Monster though it was, Max recognized it, both thanks to his myths from his world and the few he'd heard of this world. "It's Tornadus," he replied. "And he's coming back. Run!"

Without waiting to see if Alexa would listen, Max obeyed his own advice and ran the other way, keeping at the bases of the hills where he hoped that it'd be most difficult for the larger, airborne pokémon to reach him.

"Hey, wait for me!" Alexa shouted from somewhere behind him. "Wait for-"

A surprised scream rent the air, and Max momentarily turned to see that Alexa had unconsciously opened her wings in her haste, causing her to be caught up once again in the maelstrom that danced between the hills.

Max skidded to a stop and began to head back, but he hadn't gone far when he caught sight of Tornadus barreling forward, straight for Alexa.

Max had one moment of indecision when he looked back and forth from the helpless pidgey to the flying monster with the glowing yellow eyes.

I'm sorry, Alexa!

He turned and ran once again, almost without thinking about it.

There's nothing I could've done! he thought as he heard the pidgey's shriek cut through the wind, presumably as she was captured. *Even if I could've made my wings work well enough to catch you in the air, I couldn't have fought him off. I'm probably next, anyway! Oh, dear Arceus, what am I going to do?*

He took another glance back. He could see Alexa in Tornadus's grasp as the monster hurtled forward once again, this time with Max locked in his sights. Max prepared to duck once more, but this time Tornadus was expecting it. He slowed down as he got closer, so that catching Max would be as simple as reaching down and picking up a stone from the ground.

Max panicked. He managed to jump aside as Tornadus bore down on him and, in desperation, he shot off a very weak dragonbreath at the outstretched hand. Tornadus withdrew his hand momentarily on instinct, giving Max a chance to run away once again.

No no no! Get away from me! Just leave me alone! What did I do? Tears of confusion and fear streamed from his eyes. This was worse even than the fight with that outlaw, Edge. At least with that scyther, he'd known what was happening and he knew he had a chance at survival, even if he couldn't have won. Plus, he'd had Zeke with him. But this was different in so many ways.

Tornadus isn't even supposed to be here! That very first day, that oddish said something about him. Tornadus and Thundorus and Landorus - they all supposedly disappeared! And before that, they were supposed to be good! Why's he coming after me, then? Why why why why-

He squawked as the massive hand grabbed him by the tail and he felt himself yanked into the air. In a moment, he felt himself being blown almost straight sideways as the legendary pokémon picked up speed and height, flying above even the tallest of the hilltop trees.

"Let us go, you big oaf!" Alexa was shouting; only her head showed above the pokémon's massive fist. "I can barely breathe in here! Max, you're mostly free - do something! Attack!"

For a moment or two, Max was almost too scared to move as he was buffeted by the wind. But eventually, his own desperation kicked in. He didn't think, or plan. He mindlessly attacked with his wings, hitting at the hand that gripped his tail.

The hand didn't falter.

"Come on, Max! Is that the best you've got?" Alexa shouted out. "What sort of guild pokémon are you?"

"I don't see you doing anything!" Max shouted as he continued to hit at the hand, his voice high and cracking with fear.

"I'm a flier, not much of a battler!" Alexa defended. "I can't do much unless I can get in to the air! Come on, Max, you gotta be able to do more than just hit him!"

Max tried to calm himself and, after he was as close as he could get to his prime mindset, he let out a dragonbreath. But it was a complete failure. He felt terrified and helpless, not majestic and strong; the weak puff of purple flame that did manage to come from his beak ended up just blowing back into his face.

More tears came from his eyes, thanks both to his fear and shame.

"Come on! That all you got?" Alexa egged him on, though her own voice was beginning to convey the fear she'd held back until now. "You said you're here 'cuz of karma, right? Then hurry up and make up for whatever it was you did as a human! Save the both of us, for Arceus's sake!"

"I can't, all right!" he shouted. He was angry and frightened and ashamed, and he just wanted it all to go away. He wanted to be back with Zeke at the guild, or back in Unova with his family, with the little sister he'd never see again, or-

"Tornadus, why are you doing this?" the archen shouted out in desperation as he saw Treetopped Hills receding in the distance behind them. At this speed, Tornadus could take them to wherever he wanted in no time; the thought terrified Max. He continued to shout, "Why? You're supposed to keep the weather in balance, not use it to attack helpless pokémon! Even though you've been gone for longer than anyone can remember, I've only ever heard about how good of a pokémon you are! So why are you doing this to us?"

As Max spoke, he felt a deeper feeling rise up inside him, one that - though perhaps not as grand as the sensation of his dragonbreath - was just as powerful. It felt as if generations of pokémon before him

sympathized with his plight and knew that something was wrong. It was as if they knew that there was no reason that any pokémon should attack another like this, and there was definitely no reason why one of the legendary pokémon responsible for keeping the world in balance should do such a thing. Max recognized the power as the first attack he'd ever used, and one that he'd utilized many times since then. It crept outward from his bones, filling every bit of skin and muscles and scale and feather until, finally, he could take it no longer.

"Let us GO, Tornadus!"

He released the burst of ancient energy from his body, this time aiming his attack not at the hand that held him, but rather at the face that was staring ahead with almost trancelike blankness.

And this time, Max's attack did its job.

Tornadus roared in pain and dropped in the sky, not seriously injured by any means but in pain all the same. He kept his grip on his captives despite his pain, though, and managed to arrest his fall just before hitting the ground.

Though he had caught himself, the effects of the attack were still being felt. As Max looked up at him, the godlike pokémon seemed almost disoriented as he looked at the two pokémon in his hands in confusion.

In a deep voice, he said, "What…?"

"Let us down already!" Alexa shouted out, apparently encouraged by his confusion.

To Max's surprise, Tornadus listened. He lowered himself even closer to the ground and carefully dropped the two birds. The winds calmed for a moment, and there was silence as Alexa and Max watched him and he, in turn, watched them.

Then, the legendary pokémon suddenly seized up and roared, clutching his hands to his chest as if he were trying to dig in and rip out his own heart. Alexa and Max both squawked and prepared to run again, but Tornadus had apparently forgotten about them. The winds picked up with more force than ever, blowing both birds away from the god of wind as he took off, his roar of pain receding with the winds until, eventually, both wind and roar died down to nothing and the two pokémon were left in the overcast night.

The two looked at each other. Both were a mess, with feathers broken and out of place. But neither cared much about their appearances at that moment.

"Well, what the heck was that all about?" Alexa asked. "Oh, and thanks for just leaving me behind, by the way!"

Max bowed his head. "Sorry. I just- I couldn't help it. I was terrified. Sorry. I'm… I'm just sorry. I can't-"

"Ah, don't freak out about it," Alexa said as she smoothed some feathers. "I don't blame you, really… That thing was terrifying. And you couldn't have really done anything." She paused and then continued, "Actually, I take that back. You could do something. You *did* do something. What exactly did you do?"

"You're guess is as good as mine," Max said as he calmed himself, the adrenaline finally beginning to leave his system. "It was an ancientpower attack, and a stronger one than I've ever been able to do before… But it wasn't enough to really hurt a pokémon like that. Not too much. And it doesn't confuse pokémon, so there's no reason… Really, I don't know. Why did he come after us in the first place?"

"Beats me." Then, ruffling her feathers, she said, "Can we get to somewhere less… Exposed? I don't exactly feel safe here anymore."

Max nodded as he looked up at the sky, half expecting for the wind to pick back up and Tornadus to return. For a moment, the clouds

parted and Max thought he saw a flash of colors darting in the atmosphere above, perhaps like an aurora; but then the clouds closed again, leaving him and Alexa in the dark once again. "Agreed," he said after a moment's thought. "Let's head back to the guild. There's no place I'd feel safer if Tornadus decides to come back for another round."

"So, let me see if I've got this straight," Guildmaster Braviary said as he looked at Max and Alexa. "THE Tornadus - who no one has seen in so long that almost everyone thinks that he's a myth - showed up out of nowhere, grabbed you, and would've made off with you if you hadn't fought back?"

Both Max and Alexa nodded, bold in their assertion even though the entire guild was gathered around them, looking at them with scrutiny. Upon hearing the basics of Max's story, both guildmasters had decided that an immediate all-guild meeting was needed to sort out this issue, even though most pokémon had been asleep by the time Max and Alexa had made it back.

Suddenly, Fum the abra appeared right next to Max. "Guildmaster, I'm just getting word from Fo and Fee! Sounds like something similar happened there - Landorus appeared and caused an earthquake and a tidal wave, though he didn't go after anyone in particular."

The entire guild suddenly broke out into a babble of speculation; only when Guildmaster Mandibuzz raised her wings did the pokémon silence themselves.

Content that they were behaving themselves again, she lowered her wings again and said, "And you're a human, too, Alexa?"

Alexa flapped her wings indignantly. "That's what I tried to tell you all when I came here earlier today, but everyone laughed in my face! It's true!"

Mandibuzz nodded her head placatingly. "If no one believed you before, I don't doubt that they believe you now. You two being human - it has to be the reason he came after you."

"But why?" Fum said, speaking up for nearly every pokémon in the room. "Tornadus and Landorus are both supposed to be good pokémon. That's what all the legends say. Why would they attack anyone? Fi thinks that maybe it's because humans aren't supposed to be here, but-"

"No, there's something more wrong here," Mandibuzz said. "Don't you think so, dear?"

"Absolutely!" Guildmaster Braviary said. "If Tornadus and Landorus are attacking anyone and everyone, something's definitely wrong with them! Nothing justifies that!"

"And how you described him, Max…" Mandibuzz continued. "You said it was like he was in a trance?"

Max nodded. "It's hard to say, but once he caught us, he didn't even look at us even while we were attacking. And he only said one word, and that was when he was confused."

"I suspect that something is wrong with him, then, as much as I hate to say it," Mandibuzz said. "Dear? I think you know what we'll need to do."

"Right-o! Listen up, Guild!" he cawed out in his raucous voice. "Our number one priority is catching Tornadus or Landorus or even Thundurus, if he ends up showing his face! We need to figure out what's going on with them!"

"But for your own safety, please don't attempt to confront any of them alone!" Mandibuzz added as the guild broke into enthusiastic cheers, most of them quite excited for the challenge. "We will only permit highly ranked groups of four or more to go on any missions

after him! Please be on the ready - all three of them are legends for a reason."

The guild once again broke into loud conversation as pokémon turned to one another, no doubt already planning their teams for the search. Other pokémon - those who were weaker, or who didn't want to put in as much effort - began to slink out of the main meeting space, no doubt so that they could get back to sleep.

This time, Mandibuzz let the noise persist; she and Braviary had said all they needed to. However, she did lean down to Alexa and Max and say, "This is just a theory, but I think perhaps what you said to Tornadus somehow managed to get through to the real him. That's why he let you go. Or maybe it was because you're human that you were able to get through to him. It may turn out that you two are the only ones who will be able to help him, if we do manage to find him.

"That being said, I must insist that you two stay at the guild or, at the very least, that you only leave when accompanied by stronger pokémon. You might be our only hope for finding out what really is the matter. And more to the point… If anything happened to you two, I'd blame myself."

Max suddenly felt a heavy paw ruffling his head feather's and heard Zeke's voice as the luxray said, "I'll make sure to keep an eye on 'em. If you don't mind, Max."

"Thanks," Max said, glad for the stronger pokémon's support.

"Woah, wait a minute," Alexa said. "Cool as this place is, I'm not getting cooped up here! I'll just have to be a bit more careful from now on. But I've got someone I'm looking for, so unless there's someone named Cecil here, I've got no reason to stick around. Besides, I couldn't do anything to make that jerk drop me, so I won't be able to help you if you find him. Max seems to have that area of expertise covered."

The mandibuzz looked at the tiny pidgey with concern. "Are you certain that-"

"Yeah, I am," Alexa said. "I'll stay the night, but I'll be off again in the morning. Thanks for the offer, but I fly solo!"

Mandibuzz sighed. "If you're sure… Well, I bid you a good night, then, and I hope you know that any and all of the guilds would welcome you with open wings, if you need protection."

With that, both Mandibuzz and her mate headed back to their own room.

Alexa and Max exchanged a glance. "Well… Um, thanks for the flight training?" Max said, not sure what exactly was appropriate to say at this time. His mind was more preoccupied with the possibility of that monster ever coming back.

"Yeah, you bet!" Alexa said, nowhere near so tongue-tied. "Anyway, I'm gonna hit the hay for tonight. Really, even if you don't know how you did it, thanks for saving me and all. And make sure you let me know if you ever run across Cecil!"

With that, she flew up to one of the branches in the ceiling, apparently making herself at home right there, despite the fact that there were plenty of vacant rooms available should she have asked for one.

"I'll be heading to bed, too," Zeke said. "Don't let things worry you too much. Everyone likes you too much to let some pokémon mess with you, legend though he might be."

"Thanks," Max said, appreciating the thought. "G'night."

But when he left Zeke and began to walk up through the tree to his room, he was less than confident.

I'm not sure if even the guildmasters could stand up against Tornadus… He was just too powerful. Even the entire guild might not be enough protection. Maybe I should… No, running wouldn't solve anything. If he could find Alexa and I today, maybe he can find us no matter where we are. It was a miracle that we escaped today.

That thought struck him as significant. *I can make pokémon evolve when no one's evolved in years… And I managed to get through to Tornadus, maybe. I managed to do something, at least. Maybe this has something to do with why I'm here? Why I ended up like this? Maybe… Maybe this is just what I need!*

He was still terrified, of course, but hope was now surging through his veins as well, balancing it.

Next time Tornadus shows his face… I'll be ready. I don't know how, but I'll fix whatever's wrong with him, and I'll help everyone figure out why he disappeared for so long. I swear I'll finally do some good instead of running away!

Hey, the chapter is actually on time for once! ^_^ Yay for spring break, even though I'm not getting as much done as I could be… Oh well. Darn Nuzlocke challenge taking up my time! But it's good creative practice, I suppose, since I'm making a story in my head to go along with it. Just for my own benefit. Maybe I'll do a Nuzlocke fic someday…? I've considered it on several occasions. Might be fun. :)

Anyway, please review! And as always, I hope you're enjoying it! Next chapter we'll be getting off the pattern of the story so far, and after that, we'll finally be seeing all the main characters together. I'm still not entirely sure if I'll be able to make it work smoothly, but I'll give it my best shot and hope it turns out well.

Chapter 12 and a half

Author's note: Finally getting out Chapter 13! Sorry for the delay… School's been super rough, more about that in the pst-chapter author's note… Anyway, here it is! ^_^

Chapter Thirteen: Vulpix

"So, what was this mission again?" Vulpix asked as she treaded carefully on one of the few solid paths through Frozen Bog.

"They were kinda vague about it, to be honest," Bulbasaur said. "There's some 'disturbance' at the Battle Grounds. Since the Solstice Games are in just a couple days, we need to handle things. I think Deputy Zebstrika said some pokémon from the other guilds would be coming to help, too."

Vulpix frowned, wondering what possibly could be the matter. "I guess we'll find out what it is soon enough… There's the Battle Grounds, right?"

In front of them rose an island out of the muck of the bog. Yet it was no ordinary island. Glaciers rose from the ground to Vulpix's left; at the far side of the island, a plateau of massive proportions rose; great wooded areas lay scattered here and there; and, though she could see neither of them from where she was, Vulpix knew that there was a broad grassland on the south side of the island, and a lake fit for a school of wailord at its center.

"This place is amazing," Vulpix said. She'd heard a lot about it the closer and closer it got to the Solstice Games, but seeing it in person was another matter entirely.

They reached the island, glad to finally get their paws on solid land.

"So… Where should we go, do you think?" Bulbasaur asked.

Vulpix's ears instinctually flicked forward as she thought she heard something. In another moments, she was suddenly running forward, her tails streaming out behind her like streamers streaming in the wind.

"I hear someone screaming!" Vulpix explained as Bulbasaur dashed to catch up to her. *And I hear something else, too… What is it? Sort of a low rumble… Like lots of footsteps?*

They headed farther and farther inland, going through a forest until, finally, they reached the wide, grassy banks of the crystal clear lake at the Battle Grounds' center.

There, they saw an archen running along the bank, being followed by a rather large group of slow, clumsy-looking pokémon.

The archen caught sight of them and ran over, catching his breath for a moment once he was with them. Still the group of pokémon came forward, saying not a word. Most of them were moaning, though. Vulpix now saw that they all seemed to be injured, many with large bite marks taken from different parts of their bodies.

"Hi! I'm Max!" the archen said, for a moment forgetting his earlier terror. But then it came back full force as an especially loud groan from one of the nearing pokémon came out. "We've got to run. RUN!" he suddenly said. "We're all gonna freaking die if we don't get out of here! It's the end of the world!"

"Wait. Max?" Vulpix said. "I want to talk to-"

Max had ran off before she could finish her statement, though.

Before Vulpix could run after him, she realized that the bulbasaur next to her was trembling.

"Those… Those pokémon," he said, pointing at the group slowly coming towards them. "There's something wrong with them. Those injuries are too bad, and… They smell like they're dead."

Vulpix's eyes widened as she smelled the rancid air as well. "Then… Then…"

"DIE, YOU ZOMBIE SCUM!" Cody shouted as he suddenly darted into the group, clubbing them one by one through the head with his tail. Apparently, he'd managed to learn iron tail in the time since last chapter.

"Yeah! I knew we chose the right nutjob for our team!" Lisa said as she too charged into battle.

"Yeah, they're both nuts," Ryan said as he and Lisa suddenly came up behind Vulpix and Bulbasaur. "Nice to meet you, by the way. We're Team Misfits. Eastern Guild."

Bulbasaur nodded at him in a bit of a daze. "Team Rebirth. Western Guild."

"SCREW YOU, ZOMBIES!" Cody was shouting as he continued pummeling reanimated pokémon to their untimely repeat deaths. "DIE DIE DIE! I trained my entire life for this! People said 'No, you're such a stupid geek! There's not going to be a zombie apocalypse!' But I was right! And now who knows how to deal with zombie scum and who doesn't? I know how and they don't! HAHAHA!"

It was Isola's turn to sigh. "And here I thought there was someone not crazy on the team… Looks like he's nuttiest of all…"

"It all makes sense now!" Bulbasaur said. "The cold weather, the lack of evolutions, humans being here… It must be because of the zombies! They're the cause of everything!"

Vulpix's eyes widened as the horde was nearly upon them and they prepared to defend themselves, but it wasn't in fear. All of her memories were coming back to her.

"Don't worry, Vulpix, I'll save you!" Bulbasaur said as he charged into the zombies' midst. "PLANTS VERSUS ZOMBIES! Undead, you're

going down!"

He was immediately eaten by a hunger zombie tropius.

Vulpix continued to stand in shock for a moment after her memories had returned.

"I remember now," she said quietly, making both Ryan and Isola look at her. "I'm actually a cyborg sent from the future human world to eliminate the zombie threat that would begin in all dimensions on December 21st, 2012. I was created to do this. And I shall fulfill my purpose!"

Then she evolved and blastburned the coming zombie forces to redeath, and everyone lived happily ever after. Except Bulbasaur, who was dead.

The End

Just in case you couldn't tell by the whole zombie invasion, this was an April Fool's prank, although I realize that April Fool's is nearing it's end for some of you. Anyway, completely non-canon chapter here.

In all seriousness, though, I haven't had time to write the next chapter yet. I'll hopefully have it out for this Thursday, and yet… I don't know. School is crazy. Just expect sporadic updates over the next six weeks or so, until I'm out of school.

Happy April Fool's!~

Chapter 13: Emma

Chapter Thirteen: Emma

The lush clearing helped the deerling to focus on her power as she began to accumulate energy, compressing it into a sphere just in front of her. She held it there for as long as she could, gathering more and more of the verdant green energy. Then, when she could hold it no longer, she released the energy ball, hitting a stump of a tree some ways away.

"Aim is good… Power is not," Emma muttered to herself, visualizing the attack in her mind. "Too much energy is leaking out. I need to figure out how it all stays together…"

She dug her delicate hooves into the ground and tried again, this time focusing on her previous vault.

All life is connected… That's what that traveling tropius said when he showed me this, she thought as the energy ball grew yet again. *I just have to weave it tighter. Tighter… tighter!*

She released the sphere yet again, and again it hit its target with little force.

Emma scowled. "Still the same… Hmm…"

She started again, and the attack was just becoming visible when she heard a voice calling from practically right next to her.

"EMMA!"

Her concentration broke and the energy exploded in her face, knocking her back a bit. She gave her head a little shake as he got back to her feet. "Guess I shouldn't let my concentration fail in the future."

"Or you should tune everything out less!" Kara said, seemingly relieved now that she had Emma's attention. "I shouted your name, like, five times before you heard me."

A sheepish smile crept onto the deerling's face. "Sorry. Guess I get a bit into it. But you could *try* not coming up on my bad side, you know?" She flicked her burned half of an ear to emphasize her point.

Kara rolled her eyes. "Your other ear works just fine, you know. You just need to actually listen for once instead of practicing nonstop. I mean, sheesh, the energy ball I did see looked plenty good to me. Why keep on practicing it?"

"I'd rather not just be plenty good," Emma replied simply, pawing at the ground. "I'd rather be the best. And being the best takes practice."

The galvantula spat out a wad of webbing in derision. "Stupid elitist deerling. You could get over yourself a bit, you know?"

Emma wasn't offended; she had gotten used to Kara's harshly judgmental attitude over time. What mattered was that Kara had come through for Emma when it counted, and also that even with nearly half of the valley still not all that welcoming of the outsider, Kara still stood by the deerling's side.

That, and she has a point, Emma couldn't help but think. *Maybe I ought to act less… I don't know, uppity. Stop being a perfectionist. That's what everyone told me when I was a human, too…* "Anyway, what were you wanting?" she suddenly said, not wanting to bring up memories of people she might never see again.

"Oh, yeah," the galvantula said excitedly, immediately losing her moment of resentment. "There's this pidgey who came to the valley. She's a bit crazy, but she's a great flyer, and she's showing off. It's pretty cool, and since you're always asking outsiders what's up in the world around us, I figured you'd want to come."

Emma grinned. "Right you are. Lead the way."

As the two started off, Emma asked, "So, you say she's crazy?"

"Yeah, completely," Kara said. "Came here looking for humans. Said she was one herself, and said that she's met another human, too. She's a completely ordinary pidgey in every way, though, except for her flying."

Emma stumbled a bit as she walked, but quickly regained her composure enough to keep Kara from seeing her surprise.

Another human? I wonder if she knows anything more than Cody and I… And if she does know another human, is it Cody? Or someone else? Maybe with a third pokémon-turned-human, we'll finally be able to-

"Hello? Emma, you still with me?"

The deerling turned to her friend. "Oh, yeah. Just got a little bit distracted. I would kind of like to talk to her about humans, though. They're kind of fascinating, don't you think?"

Kara just looked at her for a moment. "You're weird sometimes, you know that?"

Emma just smiled. "I most certainly do. Anyway, is that pokémon her?"

As they emerged from the hilly forest into the main valley, they could see something zipping just above the surface of the lake ahead of them, while a group of Sheltered Vale's pokémon stood on the shore watching.

"Yep, that's her," the galvantula said as the bird in question suddenly darted straight upwards with such speed that the force of the downdraft made a splash in the placid water below. "Little showoff. Still, I gotta admit that she's good. Old man tailow couldn't even best

some of her tricks. Though he's gotten a bit stiff over the years, so maybe that's a bad comparison."

They reached the edge of the lake just as the pidgey landed back at the shore, puffing out her feathers in what Emma could tell was a very customary pride. "Incredible, huh?" the pidgey said, obviously referring to her own flying. "Yeah, yeah, I know it is. That's what everyone says. Imagine what I'll be like as a pidgeot!" Then, seemingly remembering something, she said, "But anyway, I'm not here only to show off my mad skills. I'm looking for someone. His name's Cecil. Tall, brown hair, a human. Anyone seen him?"

The gathered pokémon looked at one another awkwardly. Some that hadn't been there earlier when she'd first asked the question laughed, thinking that it was a joke.

The pidgey looked disgruntled. "No one? Guess I might as well be off, then."

"Oh, wait!" Emma said. Everyone turned to look at her; she quickly composed herself and said, "I just want to hear what's going on outside the valley. Mind hanging around a while and filling me in?"

As everyone else began to disperse now that the show was over, the pidgey opened her wings and flitted over, landing square on the deerling's back. "Sure, if you've got some food to spare. I'm starving. The name's Alexa, by the way. You're a deerling, right?"

"Yeah, but I normally just go by Emma," Emma said. "And I've got some leppa berries back at my tree."

"Sounds great! Onward, then, and I shall inform you of the adventures of the land - mine first and foremost, of course," Alexa said.

"You want to come, Kara?" Emma asked politely, mainly because she already knew the answer.

Kara sneered. "No thanks. I've had enough of out there for a lifetime when I went to go get pokémon to save *your* butt. If you need me, I'll be making webs or something like that."

At least I can always count on her disinterest - it means I can talk about this human stuff with this pidgey in private, Emma thought as she turned and headed off towards the tree that served as her home. As she walked, she said, "So, Kara told me that you think you're a human?"

She felt the bird's talons dig into her back a little. "You not believe me, too?" Alexa challenged.

"No, that's not it," Emma said, turning her head around to look at the pidgey as best she could. "Truth is, I'm a human, too."

Alexa nearly fell off of Emma's back, though a quick flap of her wings saved her. "Really?"

"Not so loud! I haven't told anyone!" Emma said, though no one was really near enough to hear as they exited the valley and wove through the trees. "But yeah, really. I'm from England. You?"

Alexa tilted her head, confused. "England? Where's that?"

Who doesn't know where England is? Emma thought critically before replying, "You know, Britain. The U.K." Alexa's expression was still confused. "Europe?" Emma suggested.

Alexa shook her head. "I'm from Unova."

"Unova? Is that a small country?"

"Is Unova a small country? That's like asking if wailord is a small pokémon," Alexa said. "It's one of the five biggest countries in the world, and it's considered the most developed. And you're saying you don't know of it?"

"And you're saying you don't know of England?" Emma questioned back.

Alexa shook her head.

"Hmm… This doesn't make any sense," Emma said after a time. "I actually met another human before, and he knew of England, and I knew of where he came from."

Puffing out her feathers again as if in defense, Alexa said, "Well, I met another human, too, and he was actually from Unova. Just like me."

Emma perked her ears up at the mention of yet another human. "Really? Who was that?"

"Oh, his name's Max. You've probably heard of him."

The deerling shook her head.

"Really?" Alexa asked. "Man, you guys here really *do* seclude yourselves. Everyone else in this whole region has heard of him! He's a human-turned-pokémon like us, and he's apparently made a couple pokémon evolve."

"Wait… Is this Max from the Southern Guild?" Emma asked, thinking back to Kara's evolution. That had been an anomaly; but perhaps it hadn't been a coincidence.

Alexa bobbed her head. "Sure is. He's an archen from there. So you do know him!"

"I guess I do, but I had no idea he was a human!" Emma said. "That galvantula I was talking to earlier actually evolved when he was here with some of his guild. So that was thanks to him?"

"That's what everyone thinks, at least," Alexa said. "Anyway, he doesn't know anything about how all this happened. He doesn't even

remember much about being a human. Honestly, neither do I. Suddenly we're here in this weird world without humans."

Just then, they reached Emma's home, which was really nothing more than a hollow between the roots of a tree; she'd tried a couple other places upon coming here, including some more protective dens, but none of them had really felt quite right to her. She supposed she was like real deer, in a way - more comfortable with open spaces, where she could run at a moment's notice if need be.

"Go ahead and help yourself to some berries," she said, nodding up to the branches of the tree where leppa berries grew. Alexa did just that. Emma thought in silence for a bit while Alexa ate, but suddenly, an idea struck her.

"Why exactly do you think this world is weird?" she asked. "Other than the fact that you're not a human anymore."

Alexa finished gulping down a piece of fruit before answering, "As I said, because there's no humans. Isn't that what's weird for you?"

"Well, there's that, and the fact that there are pokémon at all," Emma said. "They're just a game in my world. They don't actually exist."

Alexa paused her pecking at the fruit. "Really? You're not just pulling my leg?"

"Yeah. We've got animals, which are sort of like pokémon, but… Not so crazy powerful, I suppose."

"So what, you're saying that even though we're both human, we're from separate worlds entirely?"

Emma nodded as she folded her legs beneath her and lay down. "That's exactly what I'm saying. And if that's the case, who's to say there aren't even more worlds? But why are we here, anyway?"

"Beats me," Alexa said as she continued to literally peck at her food. "Not that I care too much. I like being a pidgey, personally. But… Can't say I'm not a bit concerned. If you didn't hear about Max, then you probably haven't heard what happened with Tornadus yet, either, right?"

The deerling shook her head. "Who's that?"

"A legend, both here and in my world," Alexa said, a bit more somber than her earlier self-confident attitude. "When I met Max, both he and I were attacked by Tornadus. Max did… something, and managed to get the thing to let us go. But man, it was scary, even for me." Defensively, she added, "I could've taken him on if he hadn't been messing with the wind so much. But… I hear Landorus is out and about, too… The guildmasters at the Southern Guild seemed to think that Tornadus was after me and Max because we're humans." Her thoughts seemed scattered, and she became more flighty as she ventured further into the topic that genuinely seemed to worry her.

"But why would anyone be after humans? Did Tornadus say anything about it?" Emma asked.

"I don't have any idea, honestly. Both Max and I thought he was acting weird, at least compared to other pokémon. Came after us without any explanation."

Emma's hopes about figuring out anything about their situation were rapidly falling. "So you don't know anything about all this - about us turning into pokémon?"

"Nope. Sorry," Alexa said, without really sounding apologetic. "And you haven't met a human named Cecil? Well, I actually figure he's probably a pokémon now, just like us."

"No, I haven't. Is he a friend of yours? If you haven't seen him, then how do you know-"

"It's a long story," Alexa said, somewhat hastily. "Anyway, I'll be off."

Guess I shouldn't have pressed her so much… If I can get her to stay a while, maybe we can figure something out! She can't leave so soon! There has to be a hint to all this somewhere, and I will figure it all out! "Are you sure you wouldn't rather stay for the night? It looks like a storm is brewing."

Sure enough, rain-laden clouds were beginning to build in the sky, though it was difficult to see them through the canopy above. But as a deerling - and, indeed, like most pokémon she had spoken with - it was easy to sense tension in the air rising. And very faintly, her good ear could hear rumbles of thunder in the distance.

Rather than accept the suggestion, the bird got ever more antsy. "Nah, I'd rather get as far as I can, maybe see if I can outfly it… Since the run-in with Tornadus, I'm not too comfortable with storms anymore. There might be nothing to it, but… Well, you might want to lay low for a bit, just in case it is him, and just in case he really is after humans. Anyway, I'm off. Thanks for the food and all."

"Sure," Emma said, hiding her disappointment as Alexa took off.

But with the pidgey gone and her words still ringing in Emma's head, the deerling realized she had bigger things to worry about.

If it is one of those pokémon she was talking about that's coming, should I go warn Kara and the others? She stood tense for a few moments, as if preparing to dash off; then, shaking her head, she once again lay down in her usual root-protected indent. *They're all smart enough to take cover when a storm is coming. If something so strong is coming, and if it's looking for humans, then Alexa probably has the right idea: lay low.* Instinctually, she used her camouflage technique, and her body became almost invisible as it browned to match the color and even the pattern of the roots around her.

But wait… What if this pokémon knows why we humans are here? If that - well, let's just say less-than-brave archen - if he could get this

Tornadus fellow to see sense for a moment, why can't I do even better? Maybe I can get him to talk to me. I'll… No, this is stupid. I shouldn't. But I am *confident in my battling. Surely it can't be that bad. No matter who it is, it's just another pokémon. I can-*

A loud peal of thunder rumbled in the distance, breaking Emma's train of thought. She let out a pent-up breath.

I'm getting ahead of myself. It's probably just another storm. As far as I know, that pidgey could have been lying to me about everything. I didn't ask enough questions; maybe she just made up that place called Unova. I guess there's nothing to do but wait here for the storm to pass… Or wait for whatever else is coming to get here.

So she settled back down a final time, listened, and - as it got darker - counted the time between flashes of lightning and peals of thunder.

Thirty seconds, divided by five… Still five miles away… Just wait.

An eerie twilight settled in the forest as the wind died to nothing. Emma went through the facts in her head, trying to shed light on this whole situation; but nothing came to mind.

Four miles now. It's moving quickly, certainly, but that doesn't mean much. It's probably just another storm.

Her eyelids were drooping now. Everything was completely calm. Her head tilted to the side, covering her only good ear.

Three miles…

Her eyes closed fully and she dozed off for what seemed like only a second, only to be awoken as a deluge of rain fell from the sky, drenching Emma even in her protected place at the base of the tree. There was hardly any wind at all, yet Emma's ears were ringing with the constant sound of thunder. And as much as she tried, she couldn't get her eyes to adjust to the gloom; even if she could've seen through the sheets of rain, the constantly flashing lightning

meant that she saw the world around her in instants rather than as a continuity of moments.

Despite her best efforts to regain her wits, the effect disoriented her as she stumbled out of her little home. She was scared for some reason, frightened by the intensity of the storm around her. It was nothing like she'd ever experienced.

She didn't feel safe in her den any longer, for some reason; it took her a moment to realize why. Entire parts of trees were crashing to the ground around her, severed by the razor edges of the continuous rain of lightning.

A… A meadow! I have to get there! she thought, still panicked. *Avoid trees because they'll attract lightning, get to an open space - no, that's not right! Open spaces are bad! Then I'm the only tall thing! What did they always say in elementary school?*

There was a crack of something above her head, and she just barely managed to leap away before an entire tree could fall down atop her; as it was, she got caught in the outer branches, and was dazed for a few moments before she regained her wits enough to pull herself up.

"Oh, what's wrong with me!" she shouted out, confused. "It's… I need something to fight! I can't fight a storm!"

That's it - this can't be natural! And if some pokémon is after humans, like Alexa said, then so be it! I'll take the fight to him!

A sense of calm fell over her. She had a plan; that was all she had needed. Now that she knew what she was doing, she could fight on her own terms. All she had to do was find whoever was doing this.

Acting on a hunch, she dashed through the forest toward the main valley. Even as she watched her new home being ripped to pieces around her, she didn't feel any anger rising within her. She only became more determined to stop the destruction.

Another tree fell in her path, ripping out smaller trees as its roots reached into the air. She trotted around it, pacing herself; if she was right and this storm was caused by a pokémon, she had to save her energy for the battle.

As she grew nearer and nearer to the heart of the valley, she saw both friends and acquaintances from the forest fleeing their own homes, some of them injured.

"Get to the edge of the meadow!" Emma shouted out as she continued onward. Yes, that was a good idea, she knew now; they'd be out of the way of most of the falling debris, but not in the middle of the field, where they would attract the lightning to themselves. Hopefully that would work. Considering the state of things, she could see no other option.

But beneath her racing mind mixed with calm logic, she had suddenly become livid. Pokémon were hurt; some she'd seen pinned under trees, limp, probably dead. Whatever was causing this - she hoped it was a pokémon now, and not just some freak storm. She needed it to be something she could fight now, not just for her own sake, but for theirs. Whatever did this… She'd taken responsibility for this valley. Even though not everyone recognized that responsibility, she still felt its weight on her shoulders, since she was by far the best battler. As long as she was around, she had to do her best to keep this sort of thing from happening.

She finally reached the edge of the valley's meadow, and saw a familiar figure standing there, just within trees. The giant arachnid was looking out into the downpour, her eyes trained on something.

Emma trotted up beside her and, as she caught her breath, asked Kara, "What are you looking at?"

But she needn't have asked; all she had to do was follow Kara's gaze. Without any tree cover whatsoever, the rain was even thicker in the meadow; Emma could just barely make out something in the dimness. It was something massive, bigger than any pokémon the

deerling had seen since awaking in this strange world. It more than quadrupled her own size, and she wasn't all that small compared to many of the pokémon around here, most of whom were unevolved.

"It's Thundurus," Kara answered hatefully, lightning sparking from her furry body. "He's supposed to have disappeared years ago. But more importantly, he's not supposed to do stuff like this! He protects pokémon from lightning, he doesn't use it against them! Why's he doing this?"

Thundurus… it sounds a lot like the other names Alexa mentioned. Which means this really is my fault. Which means I have to do something… Not like I'd sit around here and do nothing even if it had nothing to do with me. This is my home now; I'll do what I can to defend it.

"Kara, are you willing to help me fight him?" Emma said. Though she couldn't make out the creature very well, Emma knew that she'd need help from Kara to try to take down a pokémon strong enough to summon as violent a lightning storm as this.

The galvantula practically jumped backwards in surprise. "That's stupid, even for you, Emma! This guy's a legend. A *legend* . Don't you see what he's doing now? You might be a good battler, and I might be evolved, but we wouldn't stand a chance. We've just gotta wait until he goes away."

"And how much of our home will be destroyed by then?" Emma retorted, trying to goad Kara into action. "How many more pokémon will be caught under the falling limbs or struck by lightning? Do you really want to-"

"No, I don't want to wait, but fighting him won't help! Sheesh, just cut out the hero complex for once and use that brain of yours!" Kara said furiously. "We don't have a chance. At all. We'll die, and that won't do anything in the long run."

"But I can't just sit here!" Emma insisted. She'd expected Kara to jump at the opportunity to fight; she seemed so much more inclined to battle since evolving. *But if this is how it's going to be…* "Fine. I'll go alone. I won't just-"

Emma was cut off as the galvantula tackled her to the ground. "I'll tie you up right here and now if you insist on trying to kill yourself again, just like you did with that monferno!" Kara said, her sopping fur dripping onto Emma as the deerling sat, stunned, under Kara's weight. "Why do you have to fight it? Why exactly? And don't just say that it's your responsibility or something like that, 'cuz it's not! You owe nothing to this valley, and-"

"It's my fault it's here," Emma interrupted, strongly but quietly so that the pokémon in the trees and brush around them could hear. "That pidgey Alexa made that much clear to me. I can't just-"

"And why is it after you, huh?" Kara asked, not believing it for a second. "I think you're just making it up. Give me one good reason why a legend like that would come after a sorry excuse for a deerling like you."

Emma had been intending to tell Kara that she was human for a long time; the galvantula had always deserved to know. She'd just been waiting for the right moment. And now seemed as good a time as ever.

"I'm human, Kara. I don't know how, but I was once a human, and I somehow ended up here as a pokémon."

The galvantula didn't react at first as she scrutinized Emma's face for falsehood. Then, apparently satisfied that it wasn't a lie, her expression took on a very annoyed, almost deadpan look. "Figures," she said, spitting out the word resentfully. "There's no way any normal deerling would be as much of a pompous self-centered know-it-all as you are."

Kara stepped off of Emma, who pushed herself back to her hooves. Lightning was still crashing around them, and she could hear cries coming out from pokémon within the forest as they dodged limbs and searched for friends. *Whatever we're doing, we've got to hurry.*

"Well, this sucks webs," Kara said. "Fine. Whatever. I guess I wouldn't like you so much if you weren't an annoying overconfident flea-ridden sacrificial-hero idiot-of-a-grass-type. What's the plan, *human* ?"

Emma smiled; underneath the abuse was the pokémon Emma had first come to like, the one who would fight to the death for her friends. Emma wasted no more time, and instead got straight to the plan.

"The pokémon around us are all watching us, to see what we'll do. We're the de facto battlers around here, lately," Emma said. "The other pokémon here may be weak, but they're not cowards. They'll defend this valley. They just need a little… push. I'm guessing this Thundurus guy is an electric type. I just need you to distract him for a bit; it'll hurt, even for you, but you'll be able to hold out better than anyone here. Then I'll come in from behind with a take down attack. Even if it works perfectly, I doubt it'll do that much damage, but it should be enough to motivate everyone watching to help. And if they all help, we might be able to chase him off, at the very least."

Kara frowned. "I'm not happy about it, but what the heck, I'll give it a try. Just don't leave me hanging out there."

Emma flicked her half-gone ear dismissively. "And do you really think I'd do that?"

The galvantula's frown reversed itself, switching to a mischievous grin. "I think a human would do that, based on the myths. But you - not in a million years, even if you are a human."

The galvantula suddenly dashed out and, before the legend could react, she shot off a bolt of electricity. From that point on, however,

Emma lost sight of the details of the battle in the rain. She needed to focus on her own part of the mission anyway, she knew. Everyone was watching; she had to make this count.

She dashed around the edge of the valley, making sure to stay out of sight. She had no idea if Thundurus would be able to see her for a human or not, but seeing as he wasn't homing in on her yet, she figured it couldn't hurt to not draw attention to herself. Once she figured she was behind the monster, she tried to squint through the constant downpour.

Lightning was shooting back and forth from the two pokémon. Kara was moving quickly back and forth, using her speed and small size to her advantage; Thundurus, though still hazy in the rain, seemed to be something massive that floated in the air, only ever seen as a giant ball of lightning before releasing his attacks. All Emma could tell was that she was definitely behind him, since Kara was on the opposite side of him from her.

The power difference between the two was too great, Emma could tell at a glance. Kara was no pushover, but she wasn't great at keeping her head in battle. Kara would be finished off in no time if she didn't hurry.

Knowing that, Emma didn't wait any longer. Using Kara's battling and the cover of the rain to her advantage, she charged forward, intending to use her take down attack to immediately deal as much damage as she could, even at the cost of some of her own endurance.

She had covered nearly half the distance when something went wrong. As the outline of the monster became clearer, she saw him turn towards her, his yellow eyes glowing in the rain. Emma saw this with plenty of room still left between them, yet she was moving too quickly. She'd been putting everything into this attack, and now…

"No!" she shouted as she tried to slow herself down, to no avail. She was still moving forward when a massive thunder attack shot

towards her. It hit her head on and she collapsed, her momentum causing her to tumble forward until she slid to a stop, now covered in mud.

Her ears were ringing and her vision momentarily black, but some deeper instinct told her that the pokémon was coming at her again; she forced her pained muscles to get up and she hurled herself randomly aside.

She hadn't moved a moment too soon. Her vision cleared enough so that she was able to see the pokémon - a massive, almost human-like top half, with a cloud as his manner of propulsion in place of legs - zoomed past.

It's fast. Maybe I can use that to my-

"Emma, watch out!" Kara suddenly shouted out.

She still had tunnel vision, and she was absolutely fried; she realized that she'd lost sight of the enemy. Without thinking, she listened to Kara's advice and dodged. Though the outstretched hand missed her, she could do nothing to avoid the cloud that rammed into her, slamming her to the ground as the pokémon itself continued over her.

There was another lightning bolt, this time from Kara as the galvantula reentered the battle. The enemy didn't so much as flinch, nor did he look over at the returning attacker. He turned again and headed back towards Emma.

"Kara, get out of here!" Emma shouted as she camouflaged herself as best she could and dodged. "It's after me!"

Emma didn't pay attention to whether or not the galvantula was listening; she knew for a fact that Kara wasn't about to back down. But the deerling had bigger things to worry about. Focusing, she tried to call forward that sense of life around her, compressing it and-

A thunderbolt attack came at her; the mystery pokémon had needed only a split section to charge it. Her concentration broke, and the green energy burst like a popped water balloon as Emma collapsed to her knees.

I… This was a bad idea…

As her consciousness faded, she saw the pokémon approaching again; she could do nothing to stop it.

Why did I think I could beat it? Kara's right… She's always been right. I'm too full of myself.

She felt herself picked up in some massive hand, her thin legs pressed awkwardly against her sides.

If only I was stronger. If only I could be better… I'm still not good enough.

"Emma!"

Emma heard Kara's shout somewhere in the distance, and felt wind and rain blowing against her face. She tried to rouse herself - to fight, or to reassure Kara, she wasn't sure - but it was no use. She blacked out.

I can make you stronger. I can make you better. I can make you good enough - no, not just good enough. I can make you the best.

"Who are you? Where am I?" Emma was freezing; she was in darkness. She didn't remember anything about how she'd gotten here. She wondered if it was a dream. She couldn't tell. Everything felt wrong; everything felt so wrong. And she was so cold.

I can make you the strongest pokémon alive. Allow it, and you'll be invincible. When you want to protect your home and your friends, no pokémon - not even a legend - will be able to stand against you.

"That sounds nice…" she said hesitantly, her teeth chattering. She had the feeling that she'd done just that - been unable to protect those close to her. She felt like she'd let everyone down. She wanted to be stronger. "But at what cost?" There was a cost; she knew there was a cost. The voice hadn't said it, and yet he had.

Nothing important… Nothing you need… Just give it to me, and my powers will be yours to command.

"But what is it?" Emma insisted. It felt colder, darker; she wanted to go to sleep, to make it all go away.

Just give it, and it'll all turn out all right. Give it, and you'll leave this place. Give it, and your friends back in that valley will remain unharmed.

That was right. Sheltered Vale had been attacked, and she herself had been carried off by a legend. Was that who was speaking now? Horror surged through her, chilling her more thoroughly than the cold around her. If he wanted to, what would stop Thundurus from killing every pokémon there if he didn't get his way with her?

She had the opportunity to save them. She just had to give it. *It.* No, she wouldn't agree; not until she knew whatit was. She would give nearly anything for her friends, but not without knowing first what it was she was giving up.

"Answer me. What is it?"

The voice came, like a whisper in her ear.

Your Spirit.

No. Not that. Some instinct in her immediately rebelled. She'd give her life for her friends, but this? She didn't know what it was, but she wouldn't give it. That one this was inviolable, untouchable.

"No."

Are you sure?

"Quite certain, I assure you," she said, displaying false bravado even as she felt something horrible rise up in the solid darkness around her. It was like a wave coming closer, closer, closer-

Then I shall take it, whether you give it freely or not!

Emma screamed before once again losing consciousness as the darkness and cold swallowed her wholly, body and soul.

And guess who doesn't find out exactly what happened to Emma for a long time? That's right! You! Sucks to not be the author, huh? And on that note, how 'bout that April Fools' chapter, huh? :D

In another news, I have another curiosity poll up! What fanfic would you like to see me write after this? Some are much more likely than others, but I just thought I'd test the waters and see what people are curious about. And as much as I like pokémon, I've been considering expanding outside of it to other stuff… Yeah.

Anyway, sorry again for not getting out a real chapter last week; things will be hectic for me as the semester comes to a close over the next few weeks. Hopefully I'll be able to keep up, especially since we're FINALLY done with what I like to refer to as the preparatory chapters for the REAL story~! May the Solstice Games commence!

Chapter 14: The Solstice Games Part 1

Chapter Fourteen: The Solstice Games - Part 1

"Hello and hi hi, everyone, and welcome to the Battle Grounds for the Solstice Games!"

The crowd of pokémon of all types, shapes, and sizes settled down and looked up to the top of the cliff face that jutted from the otherwise lush, flat meadow. There, atop its crest, Deputy Zebstrika of the Western Guild stood, looking as serious and unamused as ever; and atop his head stood the pokémon who had spoken, Guildmaster Emolga.

The little energy-filled pokémon continued, "I know we're all going to have fun fun fun, so let's hurry up and go go GO and get these games started!"

The crowd began to cheer, but was promptly interrupted as Zebstrika's stripes flashed almost blindingly bright. Those in the front of the crowd, such as Bulbasaur and Vulpix, could hear him rapidly muttering to Emolga, "Guildmaster, you're supposed to explain the games to them! It's tradition!"

Vulpix couldn't help herself; though she'd been feeling uncomfortable about being around so many unfamiliar pokémon, she now giggled at her guildmaster's silliness.

Bulbasaur glanced over at Vulpix and grinned. "Guildmaster can be sort of a spaz sometimes, huh?"

Vulpix nodded as she heard Emolga murmur, "Aw, phooey, Zebby. You always spoil my fun." Then, in her previous loud and somewhat squeaky voice, she continued, "Okay, everyone, since Zebby is a big grimer face - no offence meant-"

"None taken!" shouted a grimer at the back of the crowd, near Team Misfits; everyone in the crowd laughed at that. Cody, on the other hand, thought that the joke was in poor taste. Then again, even he realized that he'd been in a bad mood since coming here, so he tried not to hold it against the blobby pokémon.

Guildmaster Emolga's grin widened at the grimer's comment, but she mostly ignored it continued yet again, "So ANYWAY, Zebby want's me to do some traditional watchmawhozits, so um… You know, the summer solstice is only in a few days, and that's when we celebrate Reshiram, who's one of the guardians of the Spirit of the land and stuff! 'Course, there's Zekrom, too, but we don't celebrate her for another half a year! Anyway, since Reshiram's so awesome and cool and nice and stuff, we hold these games in honor of him and in honor of daylight and warmth and all the other great stuff he's associated with! Which isn't to say that Zekrom isn't associated with awesome stuff, too, 'cuz I'd be miserable if it was hot and sunny all the time and-"

Zebstrika cleared his throat loudly and Emolga, realizing that she'd gotten a bit off course, smiled mischievously. "Anyway anyway, so we'll hold the games here as we do every year to promote unity between the guilds guilds guilds! Each of you will be teamed up with other individuals or teams from the other guilds, and you'll be assigned to complete tasks together, like games and battles and stuff. It'll be tons of fun! And then, on the day before the solstice itself, we end it with one massive challenge, and then we count up the points, and then the next day we have the awards ceremony and then we party part PARTY! So who's excited?"

Max couldn't help himself; this guildmaster was just his sort of pokémon, and he found himself caught up in her boundless enthusiasm as he cheered along with the rest of the crowd that surrounded him.

"Zebby, was that good enough?" Emolga asked her deputy as the crowd quieted down after a while.

The zebstrika sighed. "Yes, I suppose."

With a stream of electricity trailing behind her, she suddenly burst into the air like a living firework. "Then let the Solstice Games begin!"

Though all the shouting hurt her ears, even Vulpix joined in as the crowd roared this time. The noise quickly died down to a low but constant rumble as teams and friends began talking amongst themselves, seeing old acquaintances and - for most pokémon - finding the pokémon they would be teamed up with for the next few days.

"Come on, Vulpix, let's go!" Bulbasaur said loudly, in order to be heard. "We were told that our team's meeting at meeting point eight. Can you see it anywhere?"

Vulpix shook her head. "No - everyone around us is too tall. I can't see the numbers anywhere."

"Let's get to the edge of the crowd, and maybe we can circle around and find eight from there."

They slipped out of the mob of pokémon, looked for the smeargle-painted numbers that stained the trees and cliff that together boxed in the meeting space, and - once they had their bearings on which way the numbers were increasing - they headed off in the right direction.

However, Vulpix found that her enthusiasm was dissipating with every step she took.

"Something wrong?" Bulbasaur asked, seeing her sudden reluctance.

"I'm… not sure if I want to meet any new pokémon. I'm just barely used to everyone at our guild," Vulpix said. "Couldn't we have come just to watch?"

"Aw, come on, Vulpix, it won't be so bad!" Bulbasaur encouraged. "I'm sure they'll all be really nice pokémon. And who knows? Maybe we'll even get paired up with that human guy everyone's been talking about! I heard he's competing! And you wanted to ask him if he knew anything about your amnesia, right? So that'd be great, but we won't know if he's our teammate unless we actually go and meet all of them."

Vulpix frowned; now that her enthusiasm had died down, she found once again that she didn't really like the press of pokémon around her. She felt exposed, like she might do something to make herself look stupid or, even worse, do something so that someone might figure out that she wasn't really a pokémon. And there was even more behind it than that, but she wasn't about to tell Bulbasaur that-

"There's more to it than just your shyness, isn't there?" Bulbasaur suddenly said, stopping their walk completely. "This isn't still about Streya, is it?"

The vulpix grimaced at the name. "Yeah, a little," she admitted.

Bulbasaur let out a little sigh. "You know, I'm honestly not angry about it, no matter what you think. She did something weird to you, so it's not your fault. And besides, most pokémon aren't anything like her. Although she *was* right about one thing - you need to meet more pokémon! What if a day comes and I can't be around to interact with pokémon for you, like when we split up on that mission with Charmeleon? You ought to at least be able to talk to others for yourself. And even aside from that, you just need to make more friends, don't you think?"

"I suppose…" Vulpix said, reluctantly conceding.

"All right, then let's go!" Bulbasaur hurried forward, his excitement for the games finally showing through once again.

I guess it can't hurt too much to try to make friends… Maybe talk a little… Maybe, Vulpix thought as she followed her partner. But the

very thought of it filled her with dread. She'd relied on Bulbasaur for so long now, after all. And what if one of the other pokémon really *was* like Streya? What if one of them-"

"Oh, hi!" Bulbasaur suddenly said as they reached their spot at the very edge of the cliff face; below the green number eight were two pokémon, both roughly similar in size, shape, and body type to Vulpix, though being a vulpix, she was somewhat more delicately built. Bulbasaur continued, "Are you two part of Team Eight, too?"

"You bet we are!" the smaller of the two, a black, sort of inherently mean-looking pokémon said; despite her appearance, she sounded friendly enough. "Team FireFang of the Northern Guild, loyal to the end! I'm Houndour, and-"

"-I'm Growlithe," the other pokémon said, before his partner could introduce him. "Nice to meet the two of you!"

"Same here!" Bulbasaur said cheerily. "I'm Bulbasaur, and this is Vulpix. We're Team Rebirth from the Western Guild. Looks like we'll be having a high percentage of fire types on our team… Hope you two'll be careful; I've got to admit I'm a bit afraid of fire." Bulbasaur passed it off lightheartedly, as a joke, and Vulpix could tell that he wasn't too worried; still, she hoped that he wouldn't have to team up with them in a battle at all, for his sake.

"We'd never hurt a teammate, don't you worry," Growlithe said, his tail wagging.

"But funny that you're afraid of fire and teamed up with a fire type!" Houndour added, though more as a comment than as any sort of criticism. "Speaking of which, how're your fire type moves, Vulpix? Got anything you can teach us?"

Instinctually, Vulpix shrunk down a little bit. "Ah, no, probably not," she said, not meeting the houndour's eyes.

Bulbasaur chuckled. "She's just shy," he said. "She's actually a pretty great battler, though neither of us have been at the guild for long. She's already got flamethrower mastered, and she's been working on fire blast lately."

Both of the two fire-types crowded in on Vulpix, their eyes wide. "Really? That's incredible!" Houndour said. "Neither of us really know flamethrower, partly because we try to specialize in physical attacks. Hence our team name."

"Do you know how to do fire fang at all?" Growlithe asked, curious.

Vulpix shook her head.

"Then maybe we can learn something from each other!" Growlithe said excitedly. "You know, since we'll be working together for the next few days. We can teach you fire fang, and you can teach us flamethrower. What do you say?"

Vulpix looked to Bulbasaur pleadingly for a moment; then, realizing that he wasn't going to help, she said, "I'm not sure if I'm all that great of a teacher, but I'd be happy to try."

Both pokémon's tails wagged happily, and Vulpix stood up a little straighter. *Maybe this making friends thing isn't so bad, after all.*

"Random question, but why do you have a nevermeltice necklace?" Growlithe suddenly asked. "I thought only ice-types needed them."

Immediately, Vulpix shrunk back in on herself, and Bulbasaur quickly stepped in. "It's a bit of a touchy subject - it won't come off, but she doesn't remember why. I like it, personally. Kinda pretty, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah, it is!" Houndour said encouragingly, seeing what Bulbasaur was doing. "Isn't that right, Aiden?"

The growlithe - Aiden, it seemed his actual name was - thought for a moment, then said, "I don't know, Kuro, it just looks like a chunk of ice to- Ouch! What was that for?" he asked as houndour slammed her side into him, nearly knocking him off of his feet. Houndour gave a meaningful glance down to Vulpix, who was by no means ignorant of what was going on as the growlithe finally realized his mistake. "I mean, yeah, it's a really nice necklace! Sorry if I hurt your feelings by bringing it up." His ears dropped to the side of his head and his tail went limp as guilt overcame him.

"Aiden's not exactly the sharpest icicle in the north, as the saying goes," Houndour apologized, "but he means well enough."

Still put down by making Vulpix feel bad, the growlithe didn't even object to the insult.

"Oi, hey, you guys!" A new voice called out towards them, and they all turned to see four pokémon coming towards them. A strange one-headed doduo and a zigzagoon were the only species that Vulpix recognized as the new group reached the meeting spot and the smallest of the pokémon continued to speak.

"Meet your team's powerhouse - me! Stronger than any full-grown kangaskhan, faster in battle than even the fastest rapidash, and smarter than even Guildmaster Elgyem. That's me! I'm Kangaskhan of Team Misfits of the Eastern Guild, but so as to better distinguish myself from my lazy species, you are more than welcome to call me the Great and Powerful Lisa."

"THAT'S the speech you were working on all night perfecting?" a fluffy but rather dirty pokémon with big ears said as he stood beside her. "Definitely not worth the wait."

The kangaskhan immediately pounced on her fluffy companion, and the two devolved into a scuffle of punching and biting and scratching before either Team Rebirth or Team FireFang could even attempt to introduce themselves.

"Ignore them - they're idiots," the zigzagoon said blandly as the other two pokémon tumbled away in their fight. "Anyway, we're Team Misfits, as our so-called leader already mentioned. Just call me Cody."

"And I'm Doduo," the one-headed doduo said. Unlike her teammates, Vulpix thought she seemed friendly enough, though she noticed that she had the tendency to jump a little whenever some loud noise sounded from behind her or a pokémon at the edge of her vision moved suddenly. "Nice to meet all of you."

"Likewise," the houndour said, and introductions began anew for both Team Rebirth and Team FireFang.

When those were done, Growlithe - who had been becoming ever more antsy over the course of the conversation - spoke up. "But where's our Southern Guild Team? The first round starts soon, doesn't it?"

"Ah, sorry I'm late!" a small, bird-ish pokémon with long legs and a scaly tail said as he ran up. "I got a bit too caught up in talking to other pokémon. The name's Max. Glad to meet you all! I'm not sure if I'll be of much help on the team, but I'll do my best."

Max? Where have I heard that name before? And why does Bulbasaur look so surprised?

"Woah, woah, what?" Cody suddenly said, his disinterested look changing to one of incredulity. " *You're* Max? Like, the human Max?"

Archen smiled and ruffled his head feathers with a wing sheepishly. "Yeah, that's me," he admitted, looking a bit embarrassed. "That's why I was late. I guess everyone's heard about me already, huh?"

"That's so cool!" Growlithe said as he and his partner suddenly crowded around to join Cody.

Hanging back for a moment, Bulbasaur said to Vulpix, "You know, I was joking earlier when I said we might get teamed up with him! But you might as well make the most of it, whenever you get a chance to talk to him. We'll just-"

A loud, barking voice suddenly interrupted. "TEAMS! First events will be starting soon! Get to where you need to be!" Vulpix looked up and saw a tall, mostly bipedal animal-like pokémon with a crazy mane of red hair standing atop the cliff; she recalled Bulbasaur pointing her out earlier. This was Zoroark, deputy of the Northern Guild.

"And where exactly is our first event?" Bulbasaur asked.

"Oh, we got the list of events when we showed up!" Houndour said, picking up a little piece of a sort of thin, white bark off the ground. "It says here that… Battling tug of war, right here in this meeting space! Once everyone clears out, at least. Teams of seven, and the two left off on our team are you and you, it looks like," she said, nodding in turn to Vulpix and Doduo.

Already being forced to be without Bulbasaur? I know it's just for this round, and it'll maybe be for an hour or something, but…

The two left out pokémon looked at each other, and Isola smiled. "Well, looks like we'll get a chance to socialize while everyone else is working."

Vulpix quickly calmed herself, let her anxieties dissipate, and smiled back. Of everyone on this hodgepodge team, she was happy that at least it was Doduo she was first stuck with. Though her voice still carried her usual lilt of shyness, she managed to find something to say in return. "It'll be fun to watch everyone working together in the first challenge, I'm sure."

Almost immediately, she felt certain that she'd said something stupid of unnecessary, but Doduo's continued smile eased her nerves. "Knowing the, erm, interesting teamwork that my team shows, it'll be… entertaining, at the very least."

As Kangaskhan and the grey pokémon - Minccino, Vulpix soon found out - began to ask her what she meant by that, Vulpix finally felt herself relax fully. *Bulbasaur's right. The Solstice Games… So long as I try to open up a bit, I bet this thing will be a lot of fun.*

"Look at her, darting around like fighting a graveler is nothing," Cody commented as he and the rest of his multi-guild team watched Vulpix quickly dart out of the way of a graveler's rollout attack before countering with a flamethrower of her own. "She's a fire type. She ought to be losing… Such a showoff." *If I knew any good attacks, I would've blown everyone away in my battle… Figures. The world just likes to mess with me.*

"Do you *want* her to lose, Zigzagoon?" Houndour asked; despite Cody's insistence over the past few days, she and Growlithe had continued to call him by his species name. "If she loses, we don't get as many points for this round. And she's a part of our team, anyway! Why would you want her to do badly?"

"Yeah, seriously, back off! What's your problem?" Bulbasaur said to him, though he kept his eyes trained on the battle as he mentally cheered Vulpix on. "It's not her fault if you're jealous."

Cody's fur bristled as he walked up to Bulbasaur and got in his face so that he *had* to look at him. "Jealous? I'm not jealous. But your partner-"

"Cody, why don't you chill for a bit?" Ryan suggested, glancing over at the zigzagoon.

Who's he to tell me to chill? He's the one fighting with Lisa all the time. Ignoring the minccino's comment, Cody continued, "As I was saying, Vulpix won't even stoop to talk to us - she's stuck up. And I didn't say I wanted her to lose, just that she should be. Sheesh."

"You trying to pick a fight or something?" Bulbasaur asked, his tone somewhere halfway between anger and incredulousness at Cody's

behavior. "If you keep it up, I won't hold back. I've dealt with bigger bullies than you before."

"Yeah, sure you have," Cody said sarcastically. "Anyway, just cool your bulb. I just don't even see why we have to have a day of battling in the first place. As if we don't do enough of it alrea-"

There was a cry as one of the graveler's rock throws finally hit its mark, doing quite a bit of damage; however, vulpix's flamethrowers had been wearing away the graveler over time. The next attack to hit would probably decide the match, regardless of who dealt it.

"About time she took a hit," Cody said as he promptly turned around and left before Bulbasaur could carry out his threat.

Jeez… Why are they all such idiots? Cody thought as he walked away with no particular destination in mind. He just wanted to get as far away form the group as possible. *And… No, why am I so annoyed at them? Vulpix might be distant, but I was probably being a bit harsh back there… But why'd they all come at me like that? Can't* someone *see that I had a point? She and that Bulbasaur both think they're so great, just 'cuz they can battle. And those two Northern Guild mutts, too. Max is okay, but he's almost annoying in his own way. I haven't even had a chance to talk to him yet, what with how many pokémon he talks to around here! Does he even-*

"Oi, Cody, wait up a minute!"

Still angry, Cody abruptly turned around and glared at Ryan, who had apparently been following him.

"Ouch. If looks could kill, then you'd have to be arranging my funeral right now, pal," Ryan said as he caught up and calmly met the zigzagoon's glare. "Calm down a bit, won't ya? What is it that's got you all worked up all of a sudden?"

Cody turned back around and continued to walk off, his steps a bit more forceful than they perhaps needed to be. Still, he wasn't all that

angry at Ryan, even if the Minccino hadn't been all that supportive of him before. As Cody kept his eyes trained forward and walked through the grasslands between the multiple battlefields in use for the Games, he responded, "What? You don't think that that vulpix isn't more than just a *bit* conceited?"

"Hmm… Hard to say, I think," Ryan said as he walked alongside his angry friend. "I mean, she doesn't talk much, so maybe. But I think she's just shy. I was talking to Bulbasaur the other day. He said that the guild found her one day without any memory. She doesn't even know who she is or something crazy like that. Bulbasaur said that she's trying to be a bit more friendly now that she's here - and he asked me to try to help her with that, as well."

Cody snorted with derision. "Even if all that's true, that's hardly an excuse for barely even talking to us, if she's *really* trying so hard to be friendly."

Ryan's long tail made swishing noises as he let it drag through the short grass, and for a moment, that noise was the only sound. Eventually, though, Ryan spoke up again. "There's more to this than just Vulpix being quiet, isn't there? You're not honestly upset that she was winning a battle while at a type disadvantage when you couldn't win your battle earlier today, are you?"

Admittedly, that thought stung, and a wave of annoyance burned through Cody's body at the fact that Ryan had mentioned it. *I completely botched that battle… Even though the opponent was a water type, it was a mistake to try to use thunderbolt when I'm still not all that good at it. That was humiliating.*

"I'm just going to pretend you didn't bring that up. And no, it's not that," Cody said. "Or, at least, not just that."

"Then not talking to Max yet? That getting to you?" Ryan suggested, his own voice becoming somewhat more casual as he tried to ease Cody's sulky mood.

Cody sighed; as much as he wanted to stay upset at everyone for sort of ganging up on him before, his anger had already run it course. And - much to his embarrassment - he was realizing more and more that he had been mostly at fault during the brief argument. "It's annoying, but I ought to be able to catch Max alone eventually… I'll make sure I do before the end of the games. Maybe sometime during the final event tomorrow. So that's not *too* much of a problem. It doesn't really bug me, at least.

"For you, 'not too much of a problem' means 'something to overreact about for days,' Cody," Ryan joked. "But anyway, if it's not that, then what? And why take it out on Vulpix, if…" A look of realization dawned on Ryan's face. "Ah, I think I get it."

Cody's eyes narrowed as he glanced over to Ryan. He didn't particularly like that tone of voice. "What is it?"

"You *are* jealous, just not of her battling skills," Ryan explained. "After all, the only pokémon she's *really* opened up to is Isola, and so Isola hasn't been talking to you as much because of it."

"What? That's not it at all!" Cody protested, though he felt a sting of truth in the minccino's words. *Isola can talk to whoever she wants… as long as it's me. Is that how I really feel? No, it's more than just that. It's-*

"Well, if not that, then what?" Ryan asked. "What has you in such a bad mood? We've only got one more day of competition after today, so we should try to end it on a good note. Otherwise, everyone'll go back to their guilds saying how bad of a team we are. And as much as Lisa probably doesn't care, I know that me and Isola do."

He's not going to let this rest until I admit to some *sort of reasoning, will he?* Cody thought, then said, "Okay, this is going to sound stupid, so don't laugh."

"Not a chuckle shall escape this mouth," Ryan said.

"All right. It's just… I think I'm just kinda annoyed because I'm used to it just being the four of us. I don't like having to deal with so many other pokémon. I was the same back home, or so my parents always said… Just…"

Ryan nodded sagely. "Now I think I get it. Once you've got your group of friends, you don't like to share them, right? And you don't accept new pokémon easily, that's for sure. I don't think you even started *beginning* to like Team Misfits until after the mission in Mysterious Ruins."

Cody tilted his head and looked at Ryan, almost as if curious. *He's pretty much hit it on the head, but I definitely didn't start purposefully showing it until weeks after that mission… How'd he know?* "You know, sometimes I don't think I give you enough credit. You look like just a scruffy minccino, but you're actually pretty perceptive sometimes."

Ryan grinned broadly, glad that Cody's bad mood was all but over now. "If that's the case, you can start giving me proper credit by listening to my advice. If you're so jealous of other pokémon interacting with your friends, then you've just got to make those other pokémon your friends, too. Then you'll have no reason to be jealous."

"You say that like I can make friends easily…" Cody said doubtfully. "Maybe I'll just do like Vulpix and keep my big mouth shut until this is all over in a couple days."

"That's no way to go about things! Come on, Cody, you just gotta give it a try. Apologize, or if that's too hard, just try to be more friendly. I think they rest of the team will get the idea. In fact, I think you can start now," he said as one of his ears twitched in response to something and he turned around.

Cody turned and followed his gaze to see Team FireFang running up.

Panting from the short but quick run, they skidded to a stop just in front of the two Team Misfit members. "I don't care whether *you* care or not," Houndour spoke up as soon as she caught her breath, sending a hostile glance over to Cody before looking back to Ryan, "But I do know that *you* ought to appreciate that Vulpix won! She managed to burn Graveler with a will-o-wisp and that was just enough to bring him down while she continued to dodge."

"That's great!" Ryan said, his ears and tail perking upward with genuine pleasure. "Isn't it great, Cody?"

"Oh, um, yeah!" Cody said, his own excitement a bit more forced. Then, in little more than a mumble, he said, "And, I'm, uh, sorry about… you know." That was all he could bring himself to say, partly because he felt so much more in the right when talking to these two than he had when listening to Ryan's common sense. *After all, Team FireFang kinda annoying. And they could've just stayed out of it. It's not like I really meant that comment about Vulpix being a showoff, but they had to take it seriously, and-*

"Apology accepted!" Growlithe said immediately, his tail wagging.

Kuro seemed a little less certain of Cody's sincerity, but she apparently decided to hope for the best. "I think we're all heading back to the main gathering space to grab some berries at the vendors' booths before our next match. You two coming?"

"I've gotta meet someone else, actually," Ryan said, a sly glint in his eye telling Cody that the minccino didn't really have someone to meet. "You three go ahead without me! I'll catch up!" Before anyone could object, Ryan was heading off at a brisk jog in the opposite direction.

Houndour and Cody looked at each other somewhat suspiciously, as if neither expected this to be a pleasant walk; but Growlithe didn't notice the somewhat tense atmosphere. "All right, let's go! I'm starved!" he said as he began to trot off. Houndour and Cody, having no other choice, followed behind him.

After a few awkward moments of neither Houndour nor Cody saying anything (and Growlithe obliviously leading the way), Cody decided that he should follow Ryan's advice and at least try to make conversation. He cast around for some topic and went with the first thing that came to mind.

"So why didn't your guildmaster come to the games? Everyone else is here, and even your deputy is here, after all," Cody said tentatively.

Houndour inspected him for a moment, looking to see if was trying to say something critical; but, apparently satisfied that he wasn't, she relaxed a bit and said, "With the sudden drop in temperature over the last few years, the pokémon that didn't migrate south have been more agitated than usual. And even for ice-types who don't mind the cold and us fire-types who can withstand it, the temperatures being so severe causes problems. Guildmaster Abomasnow stayed behind so that there'd be someone to deal with it… At least, I think. He's never talked much, so it's hard to say what he's thinking."

"Abomasnow? What's an abomasnow? I don't think I've ever seen one at the Eastern Guild." Now that the conversation was going well, Cody's natural curiosity was kicking in.

"A big grass and ice type," Houndour explained. "He's-"

"Big?" Growlithe suddenly interrupted. "He's huge! Like, four times my height, I bet! And he's *really* scary sometimes, because you don't know if he's actually angry at you for messing up a mission or not because he won't *say* it. They say he's the strongest guildmaster of all of them!"

Cody thought back to his own guildmaster and deputy and smiled. Though everyone said that they must be great battlers to become the heads of the Eastern Guild, Cody had never seen either Elgyem or Swadloon in battle, and neither looked or acted very intimidating. "Yeah, I wouldn't doubt that this Abomasnow guy is strongest… He could definitely beat my guildmaster, at least. And the guildmaster

who opened the games didn't seem very intimidating, either." Cody said.

Whether because he had flattered Houndour's pride as a Northern Guild member or because she could finally see that he wasn't forcing the conversation anymore, Houndour finally seemed to believe that the zigzagoon in front of her really was being genuinely friendly. Without denying Cody's statements, she said, "But you can't underestimate any guildmaster or deputy, regardless of their appearances. They say that Abomasnow is only barely able to beat Emolga in battle; based on the stories, I'd do nearly anything if it meant not having to face her in a fight."

"Really? I never would've guessed," Cody said. "Anyway… What exactly is going on tomorrow? If battling is on the second-to-last day of competition, what's the finale?"

"You haven't heard?" Houndour asked. "It's a scavenger hunt. We'll be split up into team without any real team overlap - I mean, you won't be teamed up with other Team Misfit members, and I won't have Aiden on my team - and then we're sent off to figure out a series of clues."

No actual team overlap? No wonder Ryan wanted me to make friends… It'll suck if I don't make up to everyone and I get stuck with Bulbasaur or someone tomorrow. "So we've just got to find stuff for the event?"

"Not sure, really," Houndour said. "I think there's more to it than that. Battles, riddles, challenges… Stuff like that. You might be better off asking Team Rebirth. After all, their guildmaster is the one in charge of everything this year. Although I hear she's getting the other guildmasters and deputies involved tomorrow… It might just be rumor, though."

"Well, if we are getting split up into new teams, then I hope I end up with one of you," Cody said, though he realized he was maybe

pushing the sincerity levels at this point. "At the very least, I don't think Bulbasaur would want me on a team anymore…"

"You should just try apologizing," Growlithe suggested, lagging a bit so that he was now walking on Cody's other side. "Bulbasaur's really nice! I bet he won't mind."

Houndour let out a puff of flame. "I'm not so sure about that… He seems pretty protective of Vulpix. Still, if you apologize, I bet he'll try to get along with you, at least. He might not forgive you, but there's no need for you two be outright fighting or anything."

Cody nodded, though he still found the thought of getting along with Bulbasaur on any level distasteful after the earlier disagreement. "Yeah, I suppose that's true. I guess I'll go apologize first thing… Though I still hope I don't get put on his team."

"Since I haven't really had much of a chance to talk to you two, let me reintroduce myself," Max suddenly broke the long-held silence as he, Cody, and Vulpix walked towards the northern part of the Battle Grounds. "I'm Max, though nowadays I respond to 'human' too, haha… That's what most pokémon call me. Not that I mind or anything! But I prefer to go by Max." He smiled at them as best his beak could manage, trying to be as friendly as he could to make up for the fact that he'd ended up conversing more with Team FireFang than either of the other two pokémon here. *These two just don't seem as open as the rest of our team… Still, guess I should've gotten to know them more before now.*

"The name's Cody," Cody replied. Max noticed the zigzagoon's tail flicking back and forth anxiously as he spoke, and wondered if there was something more than the scavenger hunt on his mind. *Maybe he's still got something against Vulpix, and is anxious about being teamed up with her? But he seemed nicer yesterday evening… Maybe it's just the weather. It's so grey and gloomy… I wonder if it's going to storm?*

"And I'm Vulpix… Just Vulpix," The little reddish pokémon said quietly. "Nice to meet you."

She seems a bit shy… But we've just got to make her feel comfortable around us, like she does around her partner. With that in mind, he tried to get a conversation started."So, um, what do you all make of this riddle?" Max said as he held up the little piece spinarak-silk cloth, which had the riddle written on it in footprint runes. "I mean, the first part was obvious. Whatever we're looking for is in those glaciers just ahead - we ought to be there in a few minutes. But what exactly *are* we looking for?"

Cody shrugged. "Would you read it again? I forget the next part."

Max shook his head. "I'm new to this being pokémon thing, remember? I've never learned to read footprint runes."

Cody suddenly froze up. "I'm, uh, kinda illiterate too, sorry to say. Vulpix, you can read it, right?"

But Vulpix doesn't have any memory before a couple months ago, right? Max thought suddenly. *If we don't have anyone that can read it, then… Oh, everyone else on the team is going to hate us if we fail just because we don't remember the riddle!*

Vulpix stopped and looked at the ground. "Um… I can't read very well… I've only been trying to learn over the last month or so. If you give me some time, I guess I might be able to work it out."

"Sure, take all the time you need," Cody said, suddenly very friendly. "Max, why don't we give her a minute to figure it out?"

"Oh, sure," Max said, though it didn't seem like he had much of a choice; the zigzagoon was already nudging him away. As they left her alone, Max said, "So, um, how are you liking the Solstice Games? Didn't you say this was your first year participating?"

"What? Oh, yeah," Cody said, distractedly, no longer nudging but still nonetheless leading them a bit farther away from Vulpix. "I'm not much of a people pers- erm, I mean, I don't really like big groups that much. So it's not really my thing."

Max was confused for a moment by Cody's sudden self-correction, but let it slide. "You don't like it? That's too bad. I've got to admit, I'm loving it here. I mean, the guild is busy enough, but this is something different entirely! So many pokémon all hanging out together, both to participate in or to watch the games. I love the energy in the air. It reminds me of… well, a human thing."

Cody seemed to brighten as he took a glance back at Vulpix and, seemingly content, decided to stop their walk away from her. "Really? What does it remind you of?" Cody encouraged, the enthusiasm in his voice somewhat disconcerting.

Still, Max wasn't really bothered by it; there were pokémon a lot more interested in humans than this zigzagoon, after all, and he'd had to deal with all of them. "Oh, just going to festivals and stuff back when I was human. I always had a lot of fun."

Max watched curiously as Cody took one last furtive glance back at Vulpix and, Max's natural tendency to talk getting the better of him, he asked, "Um, something wrong with Vulpix?"

"Oh, no, that's not it," Cody said. Then, dropping his voice, he said, "It's just that… I've got something I need to tell you, and I don't want Vulpix to hear. You see, the thing is, I'm actually a human, too. Or I was, until I woke up here as a zigzagoon."

"Really?" Max said, instinctively lowering his voice to match. "You're not just saying that? No offense, not to say you're a liar or anything, but-"

"What do you want to know about humans? I'll tell you," Cody said. "My team doesn't really believe me, but you at least I can prove it to."

Max scratched his beak with a claw thoughtfully. "Well, I tested Alexa by asking what humans look like. Can you tell me that, too?"

"Wait, Alexa? You're not saying-"

"Another human, yeah. You didn't hear about her?" Max said. "She was with me when Tornadus attacked. Anyway, humans? What do they look like?"

Cody smiled. "Well, that's easy. Stand upright, with two legs and two arms. Sort of like a machoke, I guess? I think that's the closest thing to a human I've seen. Hair on the head, and girls usually have longer hair. And-"

"All right, I believe you," Max said, a smile growing on his face. "But this is awesome! Maybe - I mean, you don't happen to know how we got here, do you?"

Cody shook his head. "Not really. Actually… I think I died before I came here, but the other human-turned-pokémon I talked to said that she didn't think that happened to her, so maybe I'm imagining things. Or maybe that doesn't matter either way."

"Wait. *You* met another human, too?" Max asked. *This is too good to be true! Who would've guessed that I'd get teamed up with a human at the Solstice Games?* "Who?"

"A deerling named Emma," Cody said hurriedly, obviously unable to contain his excitement.

"Wait… That name sounds familiar. Did she live in Sheltered Vale, by any chance?" Max asked.

"Oh, yeah, I guess you might've met her - I never even thought about that!" Cody said. "Yeah, that's her. But aside from you, she's the only other human I've been able to find. Although I have found out that there have been humans in this world before all of us, and that-"

"Hey, um, guys?" Vulpix called over tentatively. "I've got it figured out."

"All right, coming!" Max answered. Then, more quietly to Cody, he said, "Well, let's talk about all this human stuff later. Our team as a whole is doing pretty well on point totals - if all of our mini-teams do well on the scavenger hunt, then maybe we'll win the whole thing. Might as well make the best of it!"

"But… Oh, fine," Cody said as he and Max started heading back to Vulpix. "I guess it can wait."

This is great! Even if it doesn't lead to anything, knowing more humans can't hurt. Only thing that can make this day better is if we win this scavenger hunt!

"So, Vulpix, what does it say?" Max asked, making sure that his tone was as friendly as possible; she seemed like such a frightened little thing that he just wanted to comfort her, if he could. *Funny that such a timid pokémon is so good at battling… Guess you can't judge a book by its cover, huh?*

Vulpix looked down at the note, which she had pinned beneath her paws to keep it from blowing away. "I might read it a little slow, but I'll do my best," she said. Then, haltingly, she began, "Within the dunes of ice you'll wind… Until one trio does another trio find. Body, mind, and spirit three… shall all, um… shall all be tested, until you see. In and out of glaciers cold, once all three you do hold, then shall your final mission unfold." She paused, then looked up. "And that's it… Sorry if my reading is still a bit rough."

"No, it was fine!" Max said. "For only a month of learning it, that was great. And now we know what we need to know. So… We have to find three pokémon, right?"

"Sounds like it," Cody said as he felt a drop of water fall on his nose as it began to drizzle. "And they're both inside and out of the glaciers?"

"Um, I don't mean to interrupt, but can we try to figure it out on the way?" Vulpix suddenly spoke up. "Being a fire-type, I, um… I'm not particularly fond of the rain."

Almost as if in response to Vulpix's discomfort, the rain suddenly increased again; now huge, fat drops were falling on the trio of pokémon. "I don't mind a little rain, but this is getting ridiculous," Max admitted. "Come on! The glaciers are those things up ahead, right? They might not be warm, but we at least ought to be able to get out of the rain."

As they ran, getting ever closer to the oddly shaped structures of ice that decorate the north part of the bog-surrounded island, Max thought, *I do hope this storm isn't… But no, that was just wind back then when Alexa and I were attacked, and the storm came more suddenly than this. This is just rotten luck, plain and simple.*

A moment later, he wished he hadn't thought about it as the wind picked up, the initial gust nearly blowing the archen of his feet.

And now I'm going to be paranoid until the wind goes away… Great…

When they finally got there, no one took time to marvel at the smooth, almost mirror-like surface of the low, wide arch of ice they found; by then the rain had already increased to a downpour, and they were just happy to be under some sort of protection.

As soon as they were sheltered, Cody shook the water from his fur, spraying both Vulpix and Max before he'd thought any better about it. "Sorry," he said. "Anyway… What's up with this place? Why are there ice things like this so far south?"

"This whole place is a bit odd. Haven't you noticed?" Max said. "I heard that the four pokémon who created the guilds made this place as a meeting place for all pokémon."

Vulpix nodded and, shivering a bit, added, "That's what I heard, too. That's why the trees grow so big, and why there are passages in the ice and cliffs and underneath the grasslands. This place was made to be like this." A gust of wind blew through their shelter, this time setting all of them shivering.

"Is there any chance you could make a fire, Vulpix?" Cody suggested.

"Um, sure," Vulpix said. "My fire attacks won't be at their best right now… but I still should be able to start one. Someone needs to get some firewood, though."

Glad to see she's talking a bit more, Max thought as he said, "I'll go. Be right back!"

He dashed out of cover and over to a nearby grove of trees and began picking up what sticks and things that he could find on the ground. But as he did so, his fears grew as he took a moment to see how bright the sky was, despite the heavy rain. *It's weird weather like this that always happens right before the worst storms… I wonder if-*

Thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance, answering Max's question before he could even think it.

He picked up some more firewood until his wings were as full as possible. *Even with the scavenger hunt going on, we might need to hunker down for a while. Looks like it's going to be bad. I'd almost think it's…*

A thought struck him, flashing into his mind as quickly and violently as the lightning bolts he now saw illuminating the not-too-distant sky.

What if…

He didn't waste any more time picking up sticks; he took what he had and ran back to their impromptu camp. He dropped the sticks on

the ground and, without any explanation for his sudden and obvious panic, he turned to Cody and said, "Cody, you wouldn't have happened to have been part of the team that saw Landorus, would you?"

"Huh? Yeah, I was," Cody said over a sudden peal of thunder from somewhere close by; Max imagined that he felt the ground shake a little with the impact of the bolt. "Why does it matter?"

The ground shook again, this time hard enough that everyone felt it, Vulpix more so than the others due to her type weakness. "Was that… an earthquake?" she asked.

Max didn't bother answering the question. Instead, he turned to Cody again and said, a little panicked, "My guildmasters thought that Tornadus was after me and Alexa because we're humans," he quickly explained, "and Landorus-"

"-was probably after me because I'm a human," Cody said, his own eyes widening a bit as he understood. "That's what Lapras thought, at least, and she seemed to know a lot about humans. You're not saying that earthquake was…?"

"Um, excuse me…" Vulpix said in the tense pause that followed the question that no one wanted to answer. "But… You're a human, too, Cody?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," Cody said, as if only now realizing that Vulpix was still there. "Sorry for not mentioning it before, but I didn't think it'd matter, and-"

"You're not just tricking me?" Vulpix interrupted, looking hurt, as if she already believed it was a lie.

Both Cody and Max blinked dumbly for a second; they hadn't thought Vulpix capable of interrupting anyone mid-sentence. "Uh, no, definitely not," Cody said. "I kinda wish it was a lie now, though. Max, you don't think the two of them are coming after us, do you?"

Max practically had to yell over the sound of the rain and wind and thunder and increasingly frequent earth-rumblings as he responded, "Try all three of them! They're a trio, and I think this lightning has to be from the third one, Thundurus. We're… Well, shoot, this is bad. This is bad." All of his usual geniality was gone. "How'd you avoid Landorus last time?"

"I was caught in a tidal wave, and it was almost dark. If he really was looking for me, then he might not have seen-"

The shaking beneath their feet suddenly grew stronger and stronger until all three of them were thrown off their feet and they heard cracking come from above their heads.

"We've got to get out of here!" Cody said as the quake died down momentarily, long enough for him and everyone else to get to their feet and glance up at the icy arch; even in the dimness of the storm, they could see flaws appearing in the otherwise smooth structure as it cracked. Cody didn't waste much time staring; he quickly headed out, away from the center of the arch. Max quickly turned to follow him, but instead went over to Vulpix when he saw that she was having troubles. She looked shaken and already more exhausted than either of he or Cody.

The rain had already made her less-than-comfortable, and she's weak to ground type attacks… he thought as he wordlessly helped her to her feet and accompanied her back to the outside, just as shards from the top of the arch of ice began to crumble to the ground. *What's worse, she was probably our best bet at fighting these monsters… Oh, who am I kidding? We're toast no matter who we have to fight for us!*

"We should try and find someplace else to hide!" Cody said. "They're probably finding us somehow, but I don't think they can pinpoint us if they can't see us! To the trees, maybe?"

Max nodded and led the way over there as the ground settled and the rains died down for just a moment.

But it's always calmest right before the-

"Watch out!"

Everything happened too quickly for Max to quite comprehend. Rain suddenly fell like never before, lightning flashed, the earth rumbled. A dark shape - no, two dark shapes - were at the corner of his vision, then a sudden illuminating red light shot out from somewhere behind him, its fire hot enough to hit its target even in the driving rain.

Any rational thought dissipated, dissolved in the rain and wind and noise and chaos that surrounded him.

I swear I'll finally do some good instead of running away!

That now meaningless promise echoed in his head as he ran, not even turning around to see what was happening with Vulpix and Cody.

Did I say that at some point? What good could I ever do? I can't do anything! Why would I ever even think that?

He heard Cody cry out in pain, and he felt rather than saw something massive coming up behind him, catching up with him rapidly as he ran blindly towards the nearest grove of trees.

I can't do a thing!

He squawked aloud as a hand closed around him, completely enveloping him in its grasp.

I'm a coward.

Tears leaked from his eyes as his body slumped, not so much relaxed as limp with fear and helplessness. Cody, Vulpix… He'd abandoned them without even thinking about it. Just like with Alexa, just like every single time that it mattered, just like that first time when he'd put his own safety above his little sister's.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

I'm so, so sorry…

All right, I'd really like your opinion on this chapter, more than most! This one and the next one, which will be even more convoluted, since I'm going to be going all Virginia Woolfe on it, at least perspective-wise. I'd just like to know you're overall impressions of how this chapter stood up, as compared to the one main character chapters up until now. I'd appreciate the feedback! :D

Admittedly, this didn't turn out quite as I was hoping, partly because I was rushing the thing because it was taking WAY longer than I expected ('cuz with three characters, it ended up being super long), and partly because I was distracted thinking about Tornadus coming all day today, if you'll excuse the metaphor. And I love extreme weather as long as no one gets hurt, so it was sort of a big deal… But we never really got anything where I am, despite the fact that I was right in the red of the danger zone for Tornadopocalypse 2012. Guess there's always tonight and tomorrow to look forward to, though.

Oh, and congrats to myself for surpassing 100,000 words with this chapter! Of course, that's hardly anything new for me. ^_^

Chapter 15: The Solstice Games Part 2

Chapter Fifteen: The Solstice Games - Part Two

Vulpix had to rely almost entirely on instinct as the squinted into the walls of rain that surrounded her, looking for her opponents. She'd think she'd hear something large in the darkness behind her, and would quickly run away; a shape would be illuminated as lightning coated its body, and she'd fire off a quick flamethrower at it without even thinking about it. The only good thing about the storm was that the monsters seemed to be nearly as blinded as their prey. That was enough to give her some hope. So she continued to fight.

But it's not enough. The rain - maybe if it was gone, maybe I'd have a tiny chance. But as it is… It's not nearly enough. My flamethrower can barely reach its target right now, nonetheless do much damage.

Cody couldn't believe that she was even trying to fight back. Vulpix, the shyest pokémon on the team, was somehow the only one able to do anything. All he could think to do was run, zigging back and forth as he tried to get the legends off of his tail. It was hard to say what had happened to Max; Cody was nearly certain that all three attackers were targeting him and Vulpix now, meaning that the archen was either captured, injured, or perhaps even dead.

He tried to not think about that last possibility too much.

But his zigzagging wasn't enough to throw off these monsters with eyes that glowed coldly in the chaos of the storm, just as Vulpix's flamethrowers weren't enough to do any significant damage. One of the beasts was right behind Cody now; he could hear the rain pounding against its skin and the wind tearing at his body.

Where's that useless team of mine when I need them! He thought in desperation, completely out of options. *But then again, I'm glad they're not caught up in this, even if I'm… if I'm…*

There was a sudden flash of lightning so bright that Max was momentarily blinded, though he saw it only through small gaps in his captor's grasp. In another moment, he was thrown sideways and out of the giant hand as the monster was tossed backwards. He immediately began flapping his wings, which gained him enough control of his flight to land on his feet and look around, wondering what could have possibly happened.

The wind, the rain, the thunder and lightning - all had quite suddenly quieted down, he immediately noticed. And for good reason. The masters of the weather were all lying on the ground, and standing near each of them were three pokémon: a zebstrika, a zoroark, and a swadloon. And though Max didn't know any of them personally, he suddenly had hope that maybe he'd make it out of this mess.

"You know, that riddle that Emolga wrote was referring to *us*, the trio of guild deputies," Zoroark, the deputy of the Northern Guild, said with a smirk on her face. She glanced over to Cody and Vulpix, both of whom were near her. "You guys all right?"

They both nodded. Zoroark scanned the area and caught sight of Max, and he waved a wing to show he was fine. Though even this simple action was difficult; he was shaken by what had just happened.

Swadloon - who was practically right next to Max, and who must've taken out his captor - grumbled, "Sometimes I wonder how much that little electric maniac Emolga knows… Her riddle for you guys fits this situation annoyingly well. It's almost like she planned to have us here as back-up in case-"

"Be on your guard!" Zebstrika shouted as he tensed, glaring at his fallen opponent. "All we managed to do was surprise them!"

Max inadvertently squawked with fear as he looked back to the three titans and saw all of them pushing themselves up, none of them seeming all that much worse for taking the brunt of the attacks of some of the strongest pokémon in the land. Max dashed a little ways

behind Swadloon who, though not exactly a bastion of defense, had already proven herself to be stronger than appearances would say.

As her opponent rose into the air once again and slowly took in the situation, the swadloon mumbled, "Sheesh, my razorleaf didn't K.O. him? This is going to suck majorly…"

"You all should get out of here - now!" Zoroark shouted, looking over to Vulpix and Cody one last time. "I think Emolga is somewhere south of here. She's probably our best chance."

Vulpix frowned as the storm began to return to its former fury. "But… You three… You can't win, can you?"

Zoroark smiled at her. "Well, we certainly can't with you three around getting in our way. So just get going already and let us do our job!" She ran forward at the last word, her claws coated in darkness as she moved to intercept Thundros, who had just caught sight of Cody and Vulpix.

As the two other pairs of deputy versus legend also sprung into battle, Max found that he needed no more encouragement to flee. He darted off more quickly than a frightened rattata, heading in the direction that Zoroark had advised. However, he had no real, conscious intention of seeking out Emolga. His mind was focused on the running and what he was running from, not on his destination.

Cody backed up a few steps as the two pokémon in front of him clashed and Zoroark was thrown back, but not before raking shadow-tainted furrows into one of Thundurus's arms. "I don't know about you, Vulpix, but I'm following Max's example and getting the hell out of here," Cody said before dashing off after the archen.

Vulpix hesitated a moment longer. She could tell that the deputies were extremely strong, but it would still take an incredible amount of luck for them to have a chance at winning. *It doesn't feel right to just leave them here to defend us while we run away.*

The rain suddenly fell down harder.

But… I suppose I couldn't do anything to help them, either, she said as she turned and fled. *If only I could make fire blast work! Maybe it'd have enough power to do something. Maybe-*

"Come on, hurry up!" Cody shouted back at her as all three of them entered a small grove of trees. They could no longer directly see the battle, but the sounds and rumbling earth told them that it still raged on. Even though Cody didn't have much of an eye for judging battle abilities, he knew that Vulpix had been right. The deputies might be able to hold out for a while, but they wouldn't win against those floating monstrosities. He had no idea how long he and Max and Vulpix would have before the legendary trio was after them again.

Probably not long enough to reach Emolga, he thought despairingly. *If she wasn't close enough to see the storm and to come running like the deputies did, then it'll take us a while to reach her, nonetheless find her. We're-*

The group ran on and, slowly, the tremors died down, the wind and rain calmed, and the sky once again became a ceiling of gloomy grey clouds. But even then, they didn't dare slow down. All of them knew that their only chance was to get as far away as possible. But desperation could only carry them so far.

"Can we, um, take a break?" Vulpix eventually gasped out, her legs nearly ready to collapse beneath her.

Cody immediately came to a halt and let himself fall to the ground. "I thought you'd never ask."

Max was the only one who appeared able to run any farther, and stopping now made him antsy. "We should get going again as soon as possible. We don't know when-"

A fat drop of water fell on his beak, followed by another, and another. The trio looked up and saw that the sky was darkening again and the

clouds were moving erratically, as if the wind couldn't make up its mind as to which way to blow.

"They're coming again," Vulpix said, her voice forlorn.

Though growing jumpier as the weather worsened, Max turned to Vulpix and said, "You should get out of here while you still can. They're probably just after us humans. There's no reason you should get caught up in this."

Don't say that! Cody thought to himself. *Of the three of us, she was the only one who actually managed to fight them! She's our best hope at maybe getting out of this ali-*

"No," Vulpix said resolutely, her despondency suddenly gone. "I'll stick with you two. We're a team, aren't we?"

Max started to protest. "But-"

"I'm coming," Vulpix interrupted, though she still didn't seem very happy about it. *But I've got to. I'm probably just as much at fault for those monsters being here as they are. They just don't know it. And if they really are after me as well, then splitting up is the last thing I want to do.*

"Well, whatever, let's just get going!" Cody said as he started off once again, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief that Vulpix was going to come with them. *Max might be a coward, but he'll at least distract one of those things, maybe. Vulpix will be fighting another, so maybe I'll be able to outrun the third this time. At least we're in a fairly wooded area now, and that should provide some cover.*

Yet he winced as he thought what Team Misfits would think of that plan. Lisa would no doubt call him a coward for not fighting himself, and both Ryan and Isola probably wouldn't approve of him thinking of Vulpix and Max as nothing more than distractions. And strangely enough, he also felt a twinge of guilt. He liked Max well enough, after

all, and Vulpix seemed committed to helping him even though she had no reason to. *Neither of them deserve to-*

Lightning struck nearby, and the wind blew down a heavy branch nearby, nearly crushing Cody.

"You okay?" Vulpix asked as they all kept running.

"Yeah," Cody said. "But at this rate, they'll be on us any minute."

The ground rumbled enough to throw Vulpix off of her feet.

Max continued to run, but Cody paused to help her back to her feet. She smiled her thanks, and Cody felt a sort of warmth run through him despite the situation as they tried to catch back up to the faster archen. *But why do I feel so good about being nice to her now? I hated her guts up until about yesterday. Maybe it's just the situation… After all, we might as well be dead once they catch up to us. No sense holding onto grudges.*

Vulpix swiveled her ears a bit and heard entire trees toppling over somewhere close behind them, and, surprisingly, she felt the urge to turn and face their pursuers. *I just… I'm not sure why, but I want to protect these guys. Maybe it's just because they're humans like me. Or even more than that… I don't want to die here. I don't want to die, period. The thought terrifies me. I don't want to-*

This time, all three of them were knocked off their feet by the tremor that shook the ground. And by the time Vulpix had risen to her feet, the sound of the legends ripping through the trees was too nearby to outrun; even with the storm acting as cover, she didn't think there'd be anywhere to hide that would be safe from their rampaging search.

If that's the case… If there's nothing else left to do… Then I'll just have to fight.

Cody was just getting to his feet when the three legends ripped down the trees just behind them, coming quite nearly within grabbing

range. They all looked worn now, with numerous visible injuries to show from their battle with the deputies. But injured though they were, it wouldn't be enough to save them, Cody knew. If they still had the power to summon a raging storm and tear trees out of their way, he and Max and Vulpix didn't stand a chance.

As he prepared himself for what was to come, he caught sight of Max running off into the trees while one of the monsters chased after him. Vulpix, meanwhile, had already launched a flamethrower; by some miracle, it hit one of the legends in the eyes, temporarily blinding it despite how weakened the fire attack was.

But that was the last thing that went right. As the other pokémon turned to Vulpix and shot a thunderbolt her way, Cody dashed away, hoping to get out of sight before the blinded pokémon recovered the use of its eyes. *Vulpix… I'm sorry, I really am, but there's nothing I can do. You're on your own!* But he felt the guilt weighing him down even as he left her battle behind, because he knew that was a lie. He could be battling, and unlike Max, he didn't suffer from such paralyzing fear. But he didn't want to help. If it was Team Misfits, he'd help in an instant, but he didn't owe anything to Vulpix. She was on her own.

As Cody was running farther into the trees, Vulpix just barely managed to get behind a tree in time to dodge the thunderbolt. But the attack struck with such force that the tree was burned to a crisp and began to topple. She ran to take cover behind a more stable tree, firing off another flamethrower. But this time, the attack didn't have enough heat to even make it through the rain.

Taking advantage of her wasted effort, the pokémon struck out with a lightning-cloaked fist. He wasn't quite close enough to reach her through the trees, but whether by accident or design, he hit a nearby tree instead, sending it crashing down. Vulpix tried to run, but she could only get so far; one of the main branches fell atop her tails, crushing them against the ground. She couldn't help the cry of pain and fear that escaped her mouth as she found herself pinned, unable to move.

The electric pokémon, Thundurus, slowly floated closer, perhaps more wary now that his brother had been harmed by Vulpix's flames. But even that injury had only been temporary. Though red-eyed, Tornadus now advanced upon Vulpix as well, either intent on revenge or simply at a loss as to where either of the other human-pokémon had gone.

She almost couldn't think through the pain in her tails as she shrunk down and watched them as the two came ever closer. Vulpix didn't even have the motivation to try another flamethrower. *At least Cody maybe got away… Whoever I am, whyever I'm here, at least I did that much right.*

I can't do anything right! Max thought as he ran through the trees at top speed. Landorus crashed through the canopy behind him, and each time he hit a tree, the force translated itself into another tremor in the ground. Yet somehow, Max always managed to flap his wings and stay on his feet.

But his as-of-yet successful escape was little consolation to the archen. *I just left them, again! Even after Vulpix was so kind as to stick with us - she's probably fighting right now! I'm just as strong as her when it comes to a friendly battle, so why can't I turn around now? Why can't I fight?*

Though the trees helped to slow Landorus, the legend was still gaining ground.

Any minute now… Why don't I turn and fight! I'm doomed either way, but maybe if I try another ancientpower, it'll do the same thing that I somehow did to Tornadus that one time! Just turn around and do it!

But I can't! I'm too scared to even take my eyes off the ground in front of me!

Vulpix's scream pierced the air when the tree fell on her tails, the sound of her pain rising above even the noise of the thunder and rain. And though Max's mind knew that the scream was Vulpix's, his

heart heard it as something different. He once again saw himself in a sea of people, smoke nearly blinding him to everything except those immediately around him. His sister's little hand was grasped in his own, but in the chaos, in the panic, in the fear, the hand somehow slipped. He hadn't realized it until he'd heard her scream. She'd been so quiet up until then, even as the adults around her panicked. But now she screamed, and he heard her, and he…

No! I won't let it be like that time!

It wasn't Vulpix's scream that prompted Cody to reverse his direction and head back the way he had come, moving even more quickly than before. The scream had terrified him more than anything, and he wanted nothing to do with the pokémon who had uttered it, as if even thinking about that pokémon would make him share her pain.

But that was the problem. He couldn't just ignore her. There had been a time when he'd been able to ignore Isola as she and the rest of the team had been searching for him in Mysterious Ruins. That time was long gone, he'd known that for some time now. They were friends; they were almost family.

Now, he realized that the time of ignoring everyone else was gone as well. Her pain was already his own, to an extent. And as much as it didn't make any sense to him - as much as she shouldn't have been his problem, as much as he wanted to leave her alone, he just couldn't do it. It wasn't any sense of justice, nor any special fondness for Vulpix. He just had to do something, even if he knew that the something might be the worst decision of his life.

Just before Thundurus could reach down and grab Vulpix, her resignation and fear turned into something else. She thought of Bulbasaur, and she realized that it wasn't just that she didn't want to die. She was afraid of death, yes, but she also wanted to live. She wanted to live so that she could go on missions with Bulbasaur again, so that he could continue to teach her more about this world, and so that she could eventually gain the courage to tell him the truth

about herself. The fear of death, though by no means insignificant, suddenly paled in comparison to her desire to live.

Max pivoted, catching his pursuer off guard. A power rose inside of him. Yet it wasn't that old feeling of generations before him, the flood of ancientpower as strong as the earth itself. This was something different, something even stronger. He insisted to himself that, even if it was just this once, he was equal to the challenge. Not even Landorus could stand up to him now. He promised himself that right here, right now, he would be everything he needed to be and more.

As Cody reached the place where Vulpix was pinned, he leapt through the air toward the closest legend, Tornadus. And even though his fur was soaked, even though he was exhausted and afraid, he felt the electricity in the air around him, and he focused on it. He built it up in his fur, amplifying it in every bristly strand so that, halfway through his leap, his sodden fur stood straight on end as electricity arced back and forth along the natural zags.

And Vulpix felt the fire within her stoked to a level she'd though impossible even under the best conditions. It seemed unperturbed by the rain and pain, and it even seemed to mock them, taunting them to just try and quash the blaze that was already unstoppable. She tasted the fire in her mouth, but unlike her usual flamethrower attacks, she held it in, letting the dry, almost bitter taste flood her mouth. She could only hold it back for so long, she knew, but every extra second lent it greater pressure and greater power, building and building and building until-

Three powerful attacks were unleashed simultaneously.

Max opened his beak and screeched at the oncoming pokémon, his voice loud with wordless defiance. *I won't let this be like with my sister, like every other time in my life! This time, I fight!* And the feeling inside him leapt out, a stream of violet energy halfway between fire and water that struck Landorus straight in the chest.

At the crest of his leap, Cody released the electricity in his fur. No longer was it static, as he himself had insisted on being until now. It was kinetic; it was alive; it changed and reacted to the air itself as it arced to Tornadus, eventually making contact coursing through the weather god's body.

Just when she couldn't hold it in any longer, Vulpix released the flame in a massive burst, scorching Thundurus in the face right when the pokémon's hand was reaching out to grab her. The blaze momentarily lit up the area with a radiance quite unlike the cold, flickering lightning of the storm and brought with it warmth enough to completely vaporize the downpour for several feet in any direction.

And simultaneously, three gods fell to the ground as the rain and lightning and wind and tremors stopped.

Max, Cody, Vulpix - they watched their respective targets in complete and utter silence, not daring for a second to let their attention waver, in case the unreality of what had just happened truly was just an illusion that any movement or sound could shatter.

As they watched, their targets stirred. Max, alone and separated from Vulpix and Cody, groaned, and any confidence left him. It hadn't been enough. Even when he'd tried and finally given his all, this thing still wouldn't stay down. He was doomed.

Cody tensed, for once ready and willing to continue a battle. His fur was still sparking, and his muscles cried out for him to jump, to once again leap at this pokémon who simply wouldn't lose.

"Wait," Vulpix said quietly, gritting her teeth past the pain as she stared at Thundurus. Yes, he was beginning to move. She watched him move his arms and begin to push himself off the ground. But something was different. She didn't know what, but-

There it was. He lifted his head and looked straight ahead at her, and she saw that his eyes were no longer cold. She didn't know exactly what that meant even as she thought it, but she knew it was true.

There was warmth there, and kindness, and - for the moment - confusion as he met her gaze. Thundurus looked away for a few moments to see his brother also rising, and to see the devastated landscape around him, and then he turned back to Vulpix.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then stopped himself, then finally worked up the courage to speak.

"What's happened here? And where is here and… How did we get here?"

"All right, everyone, settle down!" Guildmaster Braviary yelled in a raucous voice, swooping over the crowd gathered in the Battle Grounds' main meeting area where the Solstice Games had begun just days before. Everyone quieted down, and so the Guildmaster joined Thundurus, Landorus, Tornadus and the Guildmasters and Deputies at the front of the clearing, where the meadow ended abruptly at the bottom of the cliff. Near to all of them were Vulpix, Cody, Max, and their respective teams.

Of them, Vulpix was by far the worst for wear. In addition to her exhaustion, her six tails were a mangled mess, crooked and stiff from their injury. Rose, an Audino from the Southern Guild, had said that they would heal with time, but they would perhaps never regain the lithe beauty for which vulpix were known.

But Vulpix didn't mind. She was once again with Bulbasaur, for once in her life bearing everything that was on her mind as she recounted the events of the day. She was glad to have him back at her side, and glad for his support when she'd just been through the most hellish day in her memory as a pokémon.

Cody and Max were retelling their stories as well, Cody to his team and Max to Zeke the Luxray and Team FireFang who had joined him near the front.

However, the three of them were forced to cut their discussions short as Guildmaster Mandibuzz turned to the three gods and, in a voice loud enough for the whole crowd to hear, she said, "You three have a lot of explaining to do, and we guildmasters believe that whatever that explanation is, everyone here has a right to hear it."

"With you gone all these years," Elgyem continued for her, his tone somehow both meek and accusatory, "disasters have worsened and many pokémon have died. In recent weeks, you three have even attacked pokémon directly. In the myths, you three existed as stewards of the weather, helping it to take its natural course without harming any pokémon. Were these myths lies?"

"Aw, come one, you guys are being no fun!" Guildmaster Emolga said as she darted through the air and landed atop Landorus's head. "They're new friends, aren't they, aren't they? You all are being meanie-faces!"

Landorus floated forward a bit and removed Emolga from his head. "No, they are correct in accusing us," he said as he placed the little electric pokémon on the ground. "Those myths are not lies; they are truth, and it saddens us to learn that we have been unable to perform our duties. We have been… asleep. From what you guildmasters have told us, we have been asleep for hundreds if not thousands of years."

"But why?" Elgyem insisted.

"Not by our choosing, we assure you," Thundurus suddenly said defensively.

Landorus held out his hands in a calming gesture to his brother. "Peace. I'll explain things as best I can." Then, turning to his audience, he said, "We have existed for as long as this land has existed. We are part of it. This being a land of balance, we played a part in keeping that balance. Specifically, we exist to keep balance between the heavens-" he gestured to Thundurus and Tornadus, "-and the earth," he said as he pointed to himself. "There was another

pokémon who helped keep the land in balance, as well. It embodied the very essence of the land, its Spirit. That pokémon's name was Rem, and it constantly flew above the center of the land, maintaining the balance.

"Then something happened. Neither me nor my brothers were there, so we cannot say exactly what. But the balance was offset somehow. Rem's powers would have gone out of control and destroyed the entire land had it not chosen to divide itself into two beings who, though not as powerful, would be better able to control the balance by complementing each other. One half became bright, masculine, and bold. That was Reshiram. And the other half became dark, feminine, and reserved: Zekrom. They circled constantly around the edge of the land, balancing one another.

"The body of the old Rem was now deformed and mangled, and the life had not completely left it even though its Spirit had departed. The old body crashed down to the ground in the center of the land, creating the depression in the land where it seems a bog eventually gathered, and where in the center of that bog an island somehow formed. That is where we are now."

Elgyem spoke up. "The bog formed naturally, and the island formed through the combined efforts of the Warriors of Justice and a gift of power from Reshiram and Zekrom, just so you know. But anyway, continue."

Landorus nodded his thanks for the bit of information, then continued, "The thing that had crashed was a being known as Kyurem. It is the very embodiment of cold and emptiness, for it no longer possesses a Spirit, something so basic that every pokémon has one. I believe someone mentioned that the bog around this place is called Frozen Bog? No doubt the remnants of his chill is what keeps it so. From the moment he set foot on this land, he hungered to fill the emptiness inside him, the emptiness that could never be satisfied."

Here, Landorus's voice suddenly became angry. "Yet Reshiram and Zekrom ignored the threat that Kyurem so obviously posed!"

"Now you're the one who needs to calm down, Brother," Tornadus spoke up. To the crowd, he continued in Landorus's stead. "It wasn't so much that they ignored it. Rather, they were unaware of it. Despite the fact that it was immensely powerful and had already created such a large hole in the land, he was a part of them. Kyurem was like a personal flaw - not something that is easy to acknowledge in oneself, even when someone tells you exactly what it is. And tell them we did, but still they refused to see the truth.

"We didn't dare face Kyurem as he pillaged the land, eating those he killed in an attempt to satisfy his bottomless hunger. But one day, we sensed that he was at a fraction of his former power. We didn't know what had happened, or if it was some sort of plot on his part - in retrospect, it probably was. Being what we are, he probably hungered for us, and so he lured us in with a trap. We thought we'd be able to take care of him in his weakened state, if we fought together. We did manage to defeat him, nearly. We fought him back into his crater and were about to deal the finishing blow when…"

"Yes?" Guildmaster Mandibuzz prompted.

Tornadus looked over to his brothers, who both shook their heads. Once again, Landorus took up the burden of the story. "We remember nothing except cold and darkness until we awoke to these three," he said as he looked over to Vulpix, Cody, and Max. "We think… that maybe, he somehow froze our very Spirits, then controlled our bodies…" He paused for a moment, as if mourning his own weakness. But then he looked back over to the guildmasters and said, "So now that we have told our story, please explain what has happened in the years we've been gone. This island, the establishment of the guilds…. So much has changed."

Emolga darted into the air again and, as she began to glide slowly downwards in ever-expanding circles, she said, "Ooh, ooh, let me, let me tell the story! I can-"

" *I'll* tell it, for sanity's sake," Mandibuzz said, and she jumped into the tale before Emolga could object. "As the weather grew wild in your absence, the Four Warriors of Justice appeared. Virizion, Cobalion, Terrakion, and Keldeo were their names. According to what Virizion told me, they were once just normal pokémon. But unlike other pokémon, they stepped up to the challenge of managing a wild world in place of living in a peaceful one. They formed the four guilds to deal with the disasters and crimes that were taking place across the land. Their righteous deeds gave them power so that they became an embodiment of an ideal, just as you yourselves are embodiments of nature. Though they got no massive amounts of power in addition to their already formidable skills, they did receive longevity, and they ruled the guilds for ages.

"Everyone knows that much, but what happened next is known to us guildmasters alone. Reshiram and Zekrom came to the Warriors of Justice and asked them to guard two objects. These were the Dark Stone and the Light Stone. Then Reshiram and Zekrom went to sleep, disappearing to no one knows where. The Warriors of Justice left their guilds in the hands of those they trusted - the current guildmasters - and then disappeared to guard the stones. We didn't understand it at the time, but they said that some day, humans would come to claim the stones and awaken Reshiram and Zekrom from their slumbered.

"With Reshiram and Zekrom gone, the land tipped out of balance. The ice in the north began to progress southward, disasters became more frequent, pokémon's hearts became cold, and evolutions stopped occurring.

"Finally, some weeks or months ago, you three reappeared and began making trouble - looking back on it, it was as you were searching for the humans. Perhaps this Kyurem monster that you mentioned hoped to draw out the humans through the disasters. If he still lived on controlling you all this time, then probably he is the reason why the land is quickly becoming encased in ice. If all you've said about this Kyurem is true, then wherever he is, he probably

does not wish for Reshiram and Zekrom to ruin the meal he is making of the land itself."

"Allow me to interrupt a moment, if you will," Elgyem said. "Is everything you said about the Four Warriors true? Terrakion told me noth-"

"That's because you're the biggest blabbermouth here, you sorry excuse for a guildmaster," Deputy Swadloon said as she waddled up to Elgyem's side, her leaf blanket held tightly around her. "Everything is true - Terrakion told me."

"Oh." Elgyem said.

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me!" Braviary chuckled loudly.

"Silly Terry Terry!" Emolga sang out.

Elgyem floated forward again, apparently unperturbed by the revelation. "Then I have one more question…" He turned to Landorus and his brothers. "How is it that you three were able to wake up? I understand that perhaps Max was able to do it because he is a human, and that Cody was presumably able to do it since he is a human as well-"

"Oh, hey Cody, he did remember!" Lisa said to Cody as all eyes turned to the zigzagoon. "Remember? We told him your first day at the guild that you were a human! I thought he'd forgotten!"

Cody shrunk down under the gazes of everyone in the clearing. He didn't even like being part of a big crowd, and being stared at by a big crowd was even worse.

"Is that true?" Deputy Zoroark asked as her body suddenly seemed to dissolve away, leaving a zigzagoon identical to Cody in its place. "You look like an average old zigzagoon to me."

Cody nodded ever so slightly and Max, much less shy around crowds, spoke up. "It's true! He told me about it right before we were attacked, and I confirmed it."

Everyone began talking at once, but Guildmaster Elgyem's voice rose above them as he said loudly, "To finish my question, how is it that all three of you woke up?"

"Well, Cody, you were around both Thundurus and Tornadus, right?" Braviary said. "You musta woken 'em both up, right?"

"But, erm, it was Vulpix who fought Thundurus…" Cody trailed off.

All eyes turned to Vulpix, and she shrunk back a little. Bulbasaur stepped in front of her as if to protect her from the stares, but he didn't know what to say.

Thundurus suddenly floated down, making himself as small as he possibly could as he addressed the shy vulpix. His face was still burnt, but he seemed not to hold a grudge as he said, "I'm rather thankful for what you did, even if the way you did it is still a bit… painful. So is there something that maybe you're not telling us? Maybe it has something to do with that necklace of yours… It reminds me too much of Kyurem for my liking. Does it have some power? Or perhaps you, too, are a hum-"

Bulbasaur suddenly stepped between Vulpix and the legend. "She doesn't remember anything about who she is, all right? She woke up in Glowstone Cavern without a single memory of anything, even her name! So don't be pushing her for answers that she can't-"

Bulbasaur paused mid-sentence as Vulpix poked him with a paw. "It's, um, it's okay, Bulbasaur," Vulpix said quietly, not meeting his eyes as she looked at the ground. "The truth is… I really didn't remember anything when I woke up here. But that first day at the guild, you mentioned humans, and I, um… I remembered that I was one. But that's all I've been able to remember."

She glanced up for a moment, but immediately wished she hadn't; all eyes were on her. Most of the stares she didn't mind, but it was Bulbasaur's that troubled her. His expression… He was terribly upset.

Now… Oh, this isn't how I wanted this to happen! This is what I was afraid of! He's not going to want to be on a team with a human… Now… Did I really go through everything today just to lose Bulbasaur's friendship? Did I-

"Out of the way, out of the way, coming through!"

"Please, please let us through! We have to talk to the guildmasters! Right now!"

Again the crowd's attention shifted, this time to a galvantula that was making her way through the crowd and a pidgey that flew above her.

"Ach! Wait, that's the guy, isn't it!" Alexa squawked as she backpedaled in midair, gazing fearfully at Tornadus. "He's the guy that attacked me 'n Max! What are you all doing standing around here for? Attack him already, he's-"

"Alexa, it's okay!" Max said, moving over to Tornadus. "He was being controlled before - he's fine now!"

"No, it is *not* fine, 'cuz there's the guy who took Emma!" The galvantula burst out of the crowd, sparks flying off her body as she glared at Thundurus. She looked tired and worn, and Max wondered if Kara had come here without resting, just as she had done the last time that deerling friend of hers had been in danger. "Two days ago - he destroyed our valley, killed a lot of us, and pokénapped Emma! What did you do with her, you monster!"

Thundurus met the galvantula's glare, his own eyes sad. "I'm sorry, but… I remember none of this. It's as the archen said; we were being controlled. I have no idea what happened to your friend, and… I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry."

"Oh, yeah, Emma was a human too!" Cody said, suddenly distracted from the fact that he was in front of an entire crowd. "They must've been after her because of that, just like they came after all of us humans here at the games-"

"-and like how Tornadus came after me and Alexa farther south," Max said. "You know, I wasn't able to do much to help her back when I met her… I had no idea she was a human. But now… What could've happened to her?"

Everyone was silent for a few moments. Then Kara blew up again. "Well, we can't just stand here! We have to go out and look for her, and save her, and-"

"A wild search isn't going to help anyone," Deputy Zebstrika said as he marched up to her, oblivious to the sparks she was throwing off.

"What we *need* are Reshiram and Zekrom," Guildmaster Mandibuzz said. "If your friend is still alive, then she has most likely been taken to Kyurem, a monster that Landorus and Thundurus just told us about. We have no chance at defeating it unless we have Reshiram and Zekrom at our sides."

"So? How do we go about doing that?" Kara shouted angrily, not caring who she was talking to.

Surprisingly, Deputy Swadloon - irritated and uninterested though she generally seemed - suddenly walked over to the three humans. "Well, seeing as you all and that featherbrained pidgey are the only humans here, then you've got to be the ones to wake up Reshiram and Zekrom. Unless we need ALL the humans including Emma, in which case we're pretty much doomed, but let's not think about that. The Four Warriors are waiting at their birthplaces, the four main islands adjacent to this land. We just have to go find them and ask them what to do to get the Dark and Light Stones, and then those are supposed to let us wake up old Resh 'n Zek."

"And when she says that we just have to go find them, she means WE! Like, ALL of us!" Guildmaster Braviary yelled to the crowd suddenly. "It's the humans who'll matter in the end, but these islands are huge and complex - there's no reason they can't have a little help in the search. Who's up for helping save the world?"

The crowd - which had been growing more and more anxious and pent-up as more and more was revealed to them - suddenly yelled out loudly, expressing its enthusiasm.

Braviary looked over to the humans - all of them, including Alexa - and winked. "You see? We're expecting a lot out of you all, if you're up for it. But you won't be alone. We're backing you up one hundred percent of the way! So, you guys up for it?"

"'Course we are!" Lisa said as she smooshed Cody's head to the ground, stopping the objection she could see coming. "It ain't a problem for Team Misfits!"

"Um… I'm not sure if I could ever do what I did today again," Max said, "But I want to help out however I can."

"That's a Southern Guildmember for ya'! Never backing down!" Braviary said proudly. "And you, Vulpix?"

Vulpix resisted the urge to look over to Bulbasaur for advice; she knew he was still upset, and she knew that once this whole meeting was over, he'd probably quit being her partner then and there. Though she kept her feelings from showing themselves, she was distraught at the thought, to such an extent that she didn't even hesitate, she didn't even pause to think that what was to come could possibly end up a thousand times worse than today.

"I'll go."

"Well, I'm going to pass on this!" Alexa said, much to everyone's surprise. "There's another human somewhere in this world, and I'm on a mission to find him, and I don't know where he is or what he

looks like. But I've got an idea. Who would you say is the strongest of these Warriors of Justice or whatever they're called, and where can I find him?"

"What?" Braviary said, surprised. "You're not going to help us-"

Emolga suddenly flew over. "Coby is the strongest, yup yup! He was head of my guild before me! He's kinda strict at times, yeah… But Coby is Coby, and he's really nice too, and he definitely strong strong! He lives up here in Twisted Dunes, yup yup!" She held out a wonder map - no one knew quite where she'd got it from - and pointed to a blank spot of ocean just to the northwest of the main landmass. "It's there there, but we wiped its location from all the wonder maps so that most pokémon wouldn't know that they're there, hehe! Smart of us, right?"

"I'm off to pay this Coby fellow a visit, then! Later!" Before anyone could convince her otherwise, Alexa took off and flew to the northeast.

"Well, wasn't expecting that," Braviary admitted. Then, turning to the crowd, he said, "But that's still the kind of spunk I like to see! If you all will bring your wonder maps up here, we'll have Smeargle update them and we can all get on our ways! What do you say?"

The crowd roared with enthusiasm and Lisa, caught up in the fun, finally let go of Cody's head.

Cody, irritated, spat out the dirt and grass he'd got in his mouth. "I hate you, Lisa. I hate you *soooo* much. What makes you think I wanna-"

Ryan stepped up and put a paw on his back. "Lighten up a bit, won't ya? Dangerous or not, we've got your back. And it'll be fun, don't you think?"

Cody looked over to Max, the bird who he was pretty sure was just as much of a chicken as always, even if he'd had a brave moment.

And he looked over to Vulpix who, though strong, was such a meek little pokémon that a few harsh words would probably be enough to defeat her in battle. He liked both of them now, to an extent, but it was hardly confidence-inspiring to know that he and these two tiny pokémon would be responsible for awakening Reshiram and Zekrom.

He sighed. "Yup. I knew it. If everything's resting on us, then the entire world is doomed. Great. Just great…"

So… I leave you guys at the first major cliffhanger of the story, but then I don't update for three weeks… I apologize. School has been nuts, but finals will be over this coming week and I don't have a job over the summer, so I'll have so much more time! ^_^ Anyway, I hope this chapter was worth the wait. I thought the first part went over surprisingly well, what with having three characters all going through relatively separate climactic character development and action sequences, though please let me know what you thought of it! Obviously, this is the first time I've had to mix all their perspectives in one chapter. And as for the second part of this chapter… Well, anyone who's read my other pokémon fics has no doubt figured out how much I love world building, especially myth building. :D

Anyway, the next part of the saga begins next chapter, when we return to our usual cycle of main characters going their separate ways. :) Hope you're looking forward to it!

Chapter 16: Team Rebirth

Chapter Sixteen: Team Rebirth

"So, um… Wouldn't it have been nice if Thundurus and the others had been able to fly us around to look for Virizion?" Vulpix said.

Bulbasaur didn't answer as he led the way, stepping up onto on of the roots the connected the innumerable islands of Rooted Archipelago.

Vulpix hesitated a moment, looking at the water that rushed beneath the natural bridge. Though plenty of pokémon lived on the islands, not even the strongest of water pokémon lived in the deep, fast-moving currents that divided the lush isles. It reminded Vulpix too much of the river that she'd nearly drowned in upon awaking in this world.

I wish Guildmaster Emolga hadn't insisted on us two heading here…

But Bulbasaur wasn't stopping, so Vulpix had no choice but to follow. Her only consolation was that this particular root was wide. Even with her balance thrown off by her injured tails, she didn't think she'd have any issues with this crossing.

Once they had crossed the gap to the next island, she once again resumed her efforts to talk to Bulbasaur. "But you know, Thundurus and the others said they all have to try to fix the climate, so I guess there's nothing we can do about it… I wonder if those three will really be able to do anything about the ice, though."

The grass-type didn't turn around as he began to march towards the center of this newest island, seemingly undistracted in his search for Virizion, the Warrior of Justice who resided on this island.

Vulpix sighed, finally resigning herself to the tense atmosphere that had defined their team ever since the fateful day at the Solstice

Games. She hated it. She'd relied on Bulbasaur's support and encouragement for as long as she could remember, literally. Now that he was so angry with her that he'd barely said more than a word or two to her, she didn't know what to do. She wanted to bring up the real problem, to say that she was sorry that she was a human and that if he wanted nothing more to do with her, that he was completely justified. But she couldn't. Because she was afraid that if she did, then he might actually leave her.

It didn't help that there was more bothering her than just Bulbasaur's anger, plunging her mind into even greater depths of worry. All the water around the islands had her constantly on-edge. Even when groves of tropical trees blocked it from sight, she could still hear the rushing water that surrounded her. And then there was her pendant, which seemed to be growing heavier since the Solstice Games. Every now and then she reached up to touch it, and she was beginning to imagine that the cord was becoming thicker and more solid, just as it had when that sneasel, Streya, had been around.

But it's just my imagination. I'm in a warm place, and there are no ice types around. It's fine. It has to be.

But no matter what she told herself, that weight was still there. And every time she had to cross the water, she imagined it weighing more heavily than ever, pulling her down into the water, into the darkness.

The day progressed in much this same way, with Bulbasaur too upset to speak and Vulpix lost in her worries. Despite their long hours of searching, still there was no sign of Virizion. None of the pokémon that Bulbasaur or Vulpix sometimes stopped and questioned knew anything about him.

Though tempted to at times when the silence became too much for her, Vulpix didn't try to talk to Bulbasaur again. In the long spans of quiet that resulted, Vulpix found her mind drifting farther and farther into fear.

What was it that Streya said to me that night? It's all blurry still, but… Something about a Lord of Ice. Something about him being powerful. And how was it that the weather trio had described Kyurem? Cold. Strong enough that not even the three of them could stop it. Exactly like what Streya said about the Lord of Ice. And Thundurus himself had said that her crystal had reminded him of Kyurem.

Vulpix wasn't about to lie to herself. Not when the facts were so clear, distasteful though they were. *There has to be a connection between my necklace and Kyurem, surely. But why? Why-*

She yelped a bit as one of her feet slid off the long, narrow root she was currently climbing on. Vulpix caught herself before she could tumble into the salty currents below. Though he'd undoubtedly heard her surprised shout, Bulbasaur still didn't look back at her.

She moved more carefully now, afraid of every step she took in addition to being afraid of herself.

What happened to me before I woke up in Glowstone Cavern? How am I connected to Kyurem, and why? What if… What if I was really a pokémon like Streya, willing to do whatever it takes to follow some Lord of Ice?

The root seemed to be narrowing the farther along it the two got, and they were still not even halfway along its length. Bulbasaur's center of balance was so low that he had no trouble staying upright even as the root thinned to less than his own body's width. But Vulpix, on the other hand, was now trembling with every footstep. And the root itself was closer to the surface than most, meaning that it was slick with wetness from whenever the tide had last come.

And what'll happen if I ever get back my memories? I… I don't care anymore if I wouldn't have liked who I've become now! But I'm afraid that I'll go back to how I was then! What sort of pokémon - or person - was I that I'd be aligned with something as monstrous as Kyurem? I just… I just…

And Bulbasaur - I don't deserve him! Not at all! I must be some terrible person, really, and he's such a good pokémon, and-

The root suddenly seemed to be smaller than ever just ahead, and it all became too much for Vulpix to take.

"I can't keep going!" she shouted out. The narrow root, the water rushing just beneath her, the ice at her neck, the thoughts in her head… It was all too much. She dropped onto her stomach and hugged the root beneath her as best she could so as to not fall off.

Bulbasaur finally turned around, and the expression on his face - though not angry at the delay, as she would have suspected - was far from friendly.

She looked up to him. "I'm sorry, Bulbasaur. I'm really sorry. I know you probably don't want to be partners with a human like me, and I don't deserve to have you as a partner, and we should just end Team Rebirth so that you don't have to be babysitting me anymore."

Bulbasaur just stared at her for a moment, scowling. "You think THAT'S why I'm angry at you? Because you're a human? If that's how… how… If that's how incredibly dense you are, then fine! Maybe we really shouldn't be a team anymore!"

"You mean… That's not the reason?"

"No, of course not!" Bulbasaur shouted at her. "I'm just upset because - Because we're a team! Or we're supposed to be, and yet you won't tell me anything! I don't care that you're a fire type, and I don't care that you're a human, but I do care that you keep hiding stuff from me! But you won't ever tell me what's on your mind! I mean, even with the whole Streya thing- You know, I felt really betrayed at first." His voice grew quieter. "Before I realized something was really wrong, I was really torn up about it. You probably don't even remember how I was feeling then… You were too caught up with Streya to notice me. And once it was all over, I still wasn't sure how much had been you and how much had been

her, at least earlier on… But I gave you the benefit of the doubt, because we're a team! And you were the first pokémon I talked about my parents with, and I told you everything about that, and you still didn't trust me enough to do the same, and-"

He paused, this time because he was so angry that he couldn't form words. Eventually, when his anger finally climaxed, he yelled out, "Fine! Team Rebirth is through! Find stupid Virizion by yourself, and figure out your own life!" He turned around abruptly, ready to run the rest of the way down the root to the next island.

But he was too upset, and he moved too quickly. He slid on the slick skin of the root, and before he could even think to reach out with his vines to catch himself, he was already in the water, being swept away by the current.

All of Vulpix's fear and shame disappeared at once. Vulpix knew that Bulbasaur couldn't swim. From what she'd heard, no bulbasaur could; they just weren't made for it.

She didn't hesitate. She stood up and leapt into the water after him.

As soon as she hit the water, though, panic set in. The salt stung her eyes, making it hard to see which way was up and which was down as she was pulled beneath the surface. Air. She needed air, but there was her necklace again. It felt like it was pulling her down. Farther and farther beneath the surface, until she would have to let her breath out, and by then she'd be lost in the dark, falling deeper and deeper until-

There. She felt something, and suddenly she remembered why she was here in the first place. Vulpix opened her eyes again despite the sting and saw something being carried along in the current near her. The water had seemed so much colder, so much darker a moment before; now she saw that the ocean water was warm, and clear. And the thing she had bumped into, that she had in her sights now, was in fact Bulbasaur.

I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here.

Bulbasaur was deeper than her, and she almost panicked, almost went back up to the surface. But if she went back up to get air now, to try to escape the water that surrounded her completely, Bulbasaur would almost surely be too far gone for her to save him. She watched even now as his frantic, ineffective paddling slowed and bubbles of precious air leaked from his mouth. He would die if she didn't move now.

She couldn't rid herself of the thoughts of the water crushing down on her and of her own small reserve of air being forced from her already burning lungs, but Bulbasaur was more important. She paddled down, using her still healing tails as a rudder to steady herself in the currents.

Just a little farther, and-

His bulb was the closest part of him to her. That'd have to do. She reached out and bit down hard, tearing halfway into the bulb more because of the stress of the situation than because she needed a tighter grip. And then she kicked upward, and upward. But Bulbasaur was heavy, and though the pain of her bite had woken him up a bit, all he could do was reach upward uselessly with his now extended vines, as if hoping to catch something.

Vulpix's lungs were at their bursting point now. Any moment, she'd have to let go of Bulbasaur, and then they'd both be lost. *Just kick a little harder. A little farther, a little farther…* The panic came to the fore again as each passing moment made the possibility of drowning more and more likely. *I - we - will both be lost. Down, farther into the darkness. No! I don't want that! Anything but-*

Bulbasaur came to a sudden halt, almost jerking himself from Vulpix's grip. Vulpix wasn't quite sure what had happened, but in another moment, they had suddenly broken the surface. Instinctually, Vulpix opened her mouth to gasp for air, accidentally letting go.

She was pulled back under the surface by the current, but in another moment Bulbasaur's other vine grabbed her and pulled her back the other way. And it kept on pulling as he somehow found the strength to lift her clear out of the water and onto the branch he had latched onto with his other vine.

That seemed to be the last of his strength, though. As Vulpix blinked the salt from her eyes, she saw his grip quickly slipping. Now, she wanted to get as far away from the water as possible as quickly as possible. She felt like any moment a wave might reach up and grab her and finish what it had started. But she couldn't leave Bulbasaur to die, especially not now, when they were so close to being safe. She bit down on the vine before it could slip off all the way. Bulbasaur cried out in pain again and Vulpix was nearly pulled back into the water as she took on the burden of holding onto Bulbasaur.

Vulpix kept her grip, though, and as quickly as she could she ran along the thick root back to the nearest island, dragging Bulbasaur through the water beside her. It was only when she stepped onto the beach and felt sure that Bulbasaur was far enough ashore that he wouldn't drift away that she couldn't stand it any longer. Still gasping for air and coughing up seawater, she ran up to where the sandy beach met the more fertile tree-filled area of the island. Then she spun around and faced the water, her hackles raised as if she might be able to fight off the ocean itself if it tried to attack her.

It took her several minutes to calm down enough for Bulbasaur's coughing to draw her attention away from the menacing currents, and even then she only approached him tentatively, afraid of the water that lapped at his feet.

"B-bulbasaur?" she asked, only now realizing that she was shaking violently, both from exertion and fear. "Are you…?"

He suddenly broke into another fit of coughing, vomiting up some seawater towards the end. It was only when that fit settled down that he reached up and put his uninjured vine around Vulpix's midsection. "Just… Help me get a little… farther in," he gasped out.

Vulpix readily obliged, half leading, half pulling him until they were in the shade of the trees and far away enough from the water that Vulpix could mostly relax. And once she realized she could relax, she immediately collapsed to the ground next to her teammate, not quite unconscious yet so dazed that little registered in her mind.

They stayed like that a while. Vulpix, sprawled on the ground, constantly unsettled by the sound of waves and current; and Bulbasaur, immobile except for the occasional coughs that wracked his body.

The sun was starting to set when Vulpix finally sat up, shaking the lingering water from her fur as best she could. "Bulbasaur, the thing is… I'm sorry." She looked at the ground as she spoke, not wanting to know Bulbasaur's reaction until she'd finished saying her piece. "This whole time, I wanted to tell you the truth. And I've wanted to get things off my chest. But I don't think I'm any good at just saying that sort of thing. Every time I want to, I feel like I'd just be bothering you to console myself. Or else I feel like I'm being overly worried, and that I just need to deal with things myself, and that I'd be a bad friend if I was constantly looking for sympathy. So I'm sorry. But…" She suddenly looked up at Bulbasaur and, with new urgency, said, "If you can forgive me for that, then I really want to stay on a team with you!"

Bulbasaur looked at her for a moment as he raised himself to a sitting position. And then, for no apparent reason, he started laughing uncontrollably, to the point that he started into yet another coughing fit. Vulpix instinctively shrunk down, thinking at first that he was laughing at the ridiculousness of her still wanting to be partners. However, she soon realized that it was a happy, genuinely relieved laugh.

She perked her ears forward hopefully. "Um… What's so funny?"

At her question, Bulbasaur managed to calm himself, returning to his amiable self. "Do you think Emolga plans it all?"

Vulpix tilted her head, confused. "What?"

"I can't stay mad at you now," he started off as explanation. "Not after you faced your fear and nearly died just to save me when I was being such a jerk earlier. And Guildmaster Emolga was the one who sent us here, even though I *know* she knows that you can't stand deep water, especially running water. Do you think that she thought this would happen, and that we'd end up resolving our fight? And there was the Solstice Games, where she was in charge of planning. That riddle, and you three humans being matched up together… And even us being put in the same room at the guild after I'd just lost my entire world and you literally didn't remember a thing… Do you think she plans it somehow?"

Vulpix brightened and stood up, looking at Bulbasaur hopefully. "Does this mean-"

"-that we're still a team?" Bulbasaur finished for her, a grin plastered on his face. "You can bet your tails it does. Team Rebirth won't break up over some stupid fight, not if I can help it. But I do have *one* little condition."

"Yes?" Vulpix said. *Anything, anything to stay a team!*

"Just let me know when something's on your mind, all right?" Bulbasaur said. "I mean, I've gotta admit… I'm still kinda offended you never told me anything. I don't even know how long you would've kept the human secret if you hadn't been forced to tell everyone about it, and that still just doesn't sit right with me. I want to be able to be there for you, just like you were there for me when we visited my old home and I finally had to face what happened to my parents. So can you do that?"

Vulpix nodded. "Of course!" she said without thinking. But, in another moment, her enthusiasm died. "Yeah. Of… of course."

Bulbasaur frowned and walked over to her, and they both sat down side-by-side, gazing off towards the sun as it sank into the ocean in

the distance. "Something already on your mind?"

She nodded solemnly, thinking about how much they must resemble that time weeks ago when Bulbasaur had revealed the truth about his parents. The sun had been setting then, and they'd sat side-by-side, but… Now the tables were turned. *I still don't want him to have to deal with my problems. But…*

"Care to talk about it?" he prompted when she didn't immediately explain herself.

She sighed. *At the same time, I'm ready to share this burden with someone else… I just hope that isn't too selfish of me.* "It's just… I'm worried about what I was, before I woke up in Glowstone Cavern. Based on what that crazy Venomoth said, and what Streya said, and what Thundurus suspected about my necklace… Well, I just can't get rid of the suspicion that I must be connected to Kyurem somehow. And that scares me. I just want to be sure of who I am, and-"

"Then be sure of who you are. That's all there is to it," Bulbasaur interrupted. "I mean, it might sound stupid, but just believe in yourself. Regardless of who you were in the past, you're you now. You're a vulpix who was able to stand up to even Thundurus himself, and you're a friend willing to jump into raging currents to save an easily offended Bulbasaur such as myself. Even that first day at the guild when you literally had no idea about *anything*, there was stuff that defined you. You questioned everything about yourself then, and you're still doing it now, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. And even now you still hold yourself like a… Actually, I take that back. Ever since your tails got all crumpled, you're not quite as… Oh, how'd I say it that first day?"

Vulpix felt the tips of her tails burning with embarrassment, not wanting to admit that she'd remembered his compliment this entire time. "You said I held myself like a princess," she mumbled quietly, looking away shyly.

Bulbasaur chuckled. "Yeah, that's right. I was really just trying to cheer you up that day. It was true, too, don't get me wrong! But now…" He chuckled again. "You're a bit more of a klutz."

The warmth of the blood rushing through her tails grew.

"But you know what?" Bulbasaur said, nudging her with an elbow. "I think I like you better this way. It's kinda funny… And cute, too."

Vulpix wanted to say something in response, but she really had no idea how to respond. She'd learned a lot about how to react to situations in the months since waking here, but responding to this - or, rather, responding to the real meaning behind the otherwise playful words - was beyond her knowledge. She was too flustered to even look in Bulbasaur's direction.

Bulbasaur saw her speechlessness. He scooted a little closer but, taking pity, otherwise made no further attempts at flattery. "So, you over your fear of water now?"

A shiver went through Vulpix's body and she instinctively shrunk against Bulbasaur's side. She only realized that she'd done so a second after having done it, though, and she wondered if Bulbasaur had guessed what her reaction to the question would be. Regardless, though, she saw no reason to move back away from him. After all, his presence helped to calm her more than any amount of dry land could've.

"No, I'm still afraid of water," she responded, still looking out at the water as some largish pokémon flew from one island to another in the distance, its figure nothing but a silhouette. "It looks pretty right now… And I might've managed to jump in, just because it was an emergency… But it's still terrifying." She shivered again just thinking about how the current had felt when first jumping in. It had seemed so dark, so cold, so much like the river in Glowstone Cavern that, logically speaking, should have killed her. And she could still imagine herself being pulled down, by her wet fur, and by her necklace.

That's right… The necklace. I still haven't mentioned that.
"Bulbasaur, there's one more thing I need to tell you."

"What's that?" he asked, turning to look at her in the dimness of the twilight.

"The nevermeltice necklace. It's been feeling heavier ever since that whole fiasco at the Solstice Games… or maybe even before then. I'm not sure. And I think it's growing again, like it did when Streya was around."

"What?" he asked, more alarmed now as he got to his feet and fully turned to face her, so that he could examine her necklace more closely. He looked at it for only a couple moments before reaching out with a vine to touch the cord - or, rather, what had been the cord.

"Well, darn. You're right," he said, looking her in the eyes again. "It's not all that big yet, but it's definitely more of a collar now, again. But what gives? We haven't even been near any ice types lately, have we?"

Vulpix pawed nervously at the sand beneath her. "I don't know why. I just know that it's growing."

Bulbasaur let out a pent-up breath and sat down again in the sand. "There's no sense freaking out about it now, I suppose. You still seem fine and reasonable. Once we're back at the guild, we'll ask Charmeleon of some other fire-type to melt it again. It'll be a hassle if we have to make melting it a regular occurrence, but we'll manage."

"If I do start acting, um, weird again… Promise you'll bring me to my senses?" Vulpix asked.

"As if you even need to ask," Bulbasaur said, once again upbeat. Now the last remnants of sunlight had disappeared, and the stars and the crescent moon gleamed in the night sky. "Hey, do you still remember that song you hum sometimes?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Would you sing it right now?"

Vulpix was perplexed by the request, but she figured it couldn't hurt. But before she started singing, she said, "On one condition. You ought to know it by now, too, right? So hum it along with me."

"No way! I've got a terrible singing voice!" Bulbasaur protested.

Vulpix grinned. He'd had enough fun flustering her earlier; it was time to get him back, even just a little. "I didn't say *sing.* I said hum. *Anyone* can hum. Or is this too great a mission for half of the great Team Rebirth?"

"Hmph. Fine," Bulbasaur relented. "But only 'cuz I want to hear you… Wait, did you say mission?"

"Yeah, what about… it…"

Their eyes met for a moment, and then both broke down into uncontrollable laughter.

"We completely forgot about the mission!" Bulbasaur said between fits of laughter.

Vulpix did her best to muffle her laughter, but ended up snorting instead. Their laughter increased for a moment before she managed to say, "This really shouldn't be funny, since we're supposed to be trying to save the world and all, but-" She couldn't finish; somehow, this fact just made the whole situation even funnier.

It took a while, but eventually they both managed to hold back their laughter long enough to gain control of themselves. "It's been a crazy day…" Bulbasaur said. "Angry, then afraid for my life, then happy again, then working through your problems, and now this… Sheesh. But for some reason, I wouldn't trade it for the world."

"I'd trade it for a day missing the 'afraid for my life' part," Vulpix admitted.

Bulbasaur smirked. "I suppose that's true. Anyway, what do you say? Why don't we check out this island, and if we still don't find Virizion, we'll set up camp as close to the center of the island as possible and call it a night."

Vulpix got up and, for once, took the lead as she headed towards the trees. "Sounds like a plan," she said. "But make sure you don't push yourself too hard. Your bulb isn't looking too good, and your vine didn't seem like it'd be okay, either… Sorry about that."

"Well, having a couple of bite wounds is certainly better than being dead," Bulbasaur said as he followed her, straining his neck to see if he could spot the place where Vulpix had bit into his bulb. "Besides, I'm a grass type. We tend to heal quickly. So, how'd I taste?"

Vulpix kept her eyes ahead of her, needing to focus in the darkness of the undergrowth. "I think I'll stick with Heatmor's roasted pecha berries back at the guild," she joked.

They lapsed back into a contented silence for a while, both simply happy that they were back on speaking terms with one another. But soon, Vulpix got the feeling that something was wrong. She couldn't quite put her paw on it at first, and she thought that maybe she was still just upset by the sound of water that surrounded the island.

No, that's not it. There's something else bothering me, other than the sound of the water. But… Why is it the only thing I hear?

That was what was wrong, she realized. All the other islands had had plenty of pokémon on them, isolated from the mainland though they might have been. Here, not a single pokémon had come to check on them when they'd made it to shore, and none seemed to be around now. Unless absolutely no nocturnal pokémon lived here, that wasn't natural.

"It's too quiet here," Vulpix said after reaching her conclusion. "Like we're the only pokémon here."

Bulbasaur didn't respond for about a minute. Then, he said, "Huh. You're right. Hmm… None of the other pokémon knew about Virizion. It'd make sense for him to be on an abandoned island. You don't think we happened to stumble upon his island by accident, do you?"

"Guess we'll find out soon enough," Vulpix said as she continued to make her way through the pristine undergrowth and over the massive roots that covered this and all the other islands they had traversed.

As they got nearer and nearer to where Vulpix assumed the center of the island was, she noticed something else. *The roots… They're getting bigger the farther in we go. A lot bigger.*

Bulbasaur must have noticed, too, because she could feel his excitement as they started to move more quickly, dashing between and over and under roots until finally, they broke out of the undergrowth and found themselves at their destination.

A massive, root-floored clearing spread out in front of them, empty of any actual trees except for a single, massive one that - though no taller than any other tree they'd seen thus far - was probably thick enough that all four trees of the Southern Guild would have fit inside of it with room to spare. The branches of the tree stretched far out from their source, forming a ceiling above their heads that shrouded the clearing just as effectively as the regular trees did for the rest of the island.

As they moved closer, sometimes struggling to find a way through the web of roots that reached well above their heads at times, they saw that there was more to the tree than could be seen at first glance. The trunk was not a solid, single tree; rather, it was an amalgamation of all the sorts of trees that filled this island. The roof of branches exhibited a motley tendency due to this fact. Vulpix

didn't doubt that from above, the branches of this tree of trees would appear no different from the patchwork of various leaves that surrounded it.

It's the perfect place to hide - one island among many, one island that looks exactly the same as all the others. This has to be the place.

"There!" Bulbasaur shouted out as he crested one of the taller roots. "There's something moving in the roots near the tree's base. Virizion! Is that you?"

Vulpix came up beside him and saw the large figure lying near the tree. But whatever it was, it didn't respond to Bulbasaur's call.

Bulbasaur seemed troubled. "This is one of the Four Warriors of Justice we're talking about, right? Why would he just ignore us?"

"What if he's just really deeply asleep? Or what if it's some other pokémon?" Vulpix asked.

"We'll sneak up quietly, then, just in case. At least until we can tell for sure or not who it is," Bulbasaur said before the two of them continued on.

But that was the last good look of whatever it was that they could get. They once again had to descend among the roots, moving only in the general direction that they knew the pokémon was in. That's why it came as a bit of a surprise when they suddenly found themselves practically right next to Virizion after working their way through a tangle of roots.

And there was no doubt the figure lying down in front of them was Virizion. He fit Mandibuzz's description almost perfectly - four-legged, green, and an unmistakable air of being able to dance circles around anyone in battle. What didn't match the description was the fact that he had not two horns on his head, but one; the other

appeared to have been broken off. Moreover, long, deep gashes that covered his body, staining his pale green fur brown with dried blood.

Bulbasaur immediately rushed over to the injured pokémon's side, nudging him with his vines. "Virizion! Virizion, are you all right?"

Virizion stirred a little, but didn't awaken.

Bulbasaur turned to Vulpix. "This is bad. We need to get him back to the guild somehow. Do you think… Could you climb the tree and send off a fire blast into the sky? That should get the attention of the other teams searching Rooted Archipelago, if any of them are still awake."

Vulpix looked at the tree. She was no great climber by any means, but the branches started growing low to the ground, and the none-too-smooth mix of trunks made the tree itself full of footholds. She nodded and darted off towards the tree, one of her mangled tails accidentally brushing up against Virizion in the process.

Almost immediately, Virizion's eyes opened wide and he kicked out blindly, just missing Vulpix but sending Bulbasaur flying. Vulpix immediately skirted around the flailing pokémon and ran to Bulbasaur's side as he recovered from the attack, prepared to fight if need be.

But Virizion stayed on the ground, seemingly more caught up in a nightmare than conscious of what he was doing. In a frightened but defiant voice, he called out, "The Cold One! Kyurem cannot be allowed to find it! I cannot let you have the Light Stone!" His injuries made him tire quickly, though, and in another moment he passed back into unconsciousness.

"Well, that was… unexpected," Bulbasaur said, watching the prone figure warily in case he had another outburst. "But it doesn't change anything. Can you hurry and try to get someone else's attention?"

Vulpix wordlessly heeded his suggestion and began to ascend towards the muffled moonlight and starlight above. But as she did so, her mind was once again in turmoil.

Bulbasaur probably didn't see it, but Virizion was fine until I touched him… What exactly am I, that a pokémon like him would lash out after being barely touched? Is it the necklace's doing? What can I do about it? Why can't I-

She caught her thoughts digressing into more questions that she could not answer and that would only bring her more confusion. She paused, took a breath, and calmed herself before continuing her ascent.

I'll ask Bulbasaur what he thinks about it later. Until then… Let's just hope that someone sees this. Someone who can come and help us.

She broke out of the treetop just then. After finding as firm of footing as she could manage, she loosed a brilliant fire blast high into the clear night sky. And, despite her worries, a smile came to her face at the sight. Though that final day of the Solstice Games had been terrifying, she had reason to be thankful for it.

After all, she thought with pride, *not a lot of pokémon can learn it, even among fire-types.*

MUCH closer to my preferred word range than my last couple chapters have been. Those things were too darn long for their own good.

Anyway, I'm done with school now and have no job or much else going on over the summer, so I'm actually hoping to speed up my chapter output. At worst, I will stick to my 'get at least one done a week' usual plan. However, this chapter took 3 days from start to finish, so I think that might be my loose goal for getting them out. Sure, I could in *theory* get one done a day, but that would get annoying really fast.

If by some miracle I do manage to keep up that three-day-to-one-chapter rate, then I should be able to have it done near the end of the summer. Do the math, and you'll get a rough idea of how long this thing is supposed to be. :)

Thanks for (hopefully) understanding all the recent delays due to a crazy busy semester, and I hope to make it up to you in the weeks to come!

Chapter 17: Team Misfits

Chapter Seventeen: Team Misfits

"Why aren't you happy right now, anyway?" Ryan asked Cody as Team Misfits sat on Tide-Battered Beach, waiting for the distant speck that they suspected was Lapras to see them and swim over. "You're a celebrity. Pokémon can't stop talking about you and the other humans. After all, you're gonna bring back Reshiram and Zekrom and save the world! It's not every day you get an opportunity to do that."

Cody puffed out his fur pridefully. "Well, I'll admit that I *am* pretty awesome, and deserve some recognition after having to put up with how you guys treat me all the time. But…"

"But what?" Isola asked.

"But then something bad is going to happen. The universe is going to decide that if I enjoy getting everyone's attention, I need to do something to deserve it," Cody said, deflating a bit. "And then I'll be in big trouble, because I still only really know how to headbutt and thunderbolt. Stupid karma."

"Karma?" Ryan asked.

"Another human thing," Cody said. "Just like common sense is sort of a human thing. Otherwise no one would expect us to go to a completely inaccessible island by crossing freezing, dangerous waters. Lapras even said that he's never been past the outer whirlpools. And you do recall me already nearly drowning here once, right? I'd rather not repeat the experience."

"We don't have much of a choice, do we?" Isola piped up. "The air is too turbulent for a flying pokémon to get us there, and Elgyem said that Keldeo managed to do something to keep teleporters away."

Lisa stepped over to him and rubbed the fur on Cody's head playfully. "Besides, you need to quit complaining. Don't you think you maybe got turned into a pokémon in order to do this?"

"I dunno… How those three legendary cloud-thingies said things, they didn't really anything about all the time while they were controlled," Cody said. "And what the guildmasters said made it sound like Reshiram and Zekrom weren't exactly planning to go to sleep and abandon the land for a decade. And they didn't really say *why* we humans were needed for to wake them up, just that that's how it is."

"It didn't sound like the guildmasters knew that much about it themselves, if I'm any judge," Ryan said.

"Exactly," Cody said unhappily. "So we still know nothing about why Reshiram and Zekrom had to fall asleep in the first place, and we've got no way of knowing whether or not those two actually brought us humans here or if something else entirely happened. It feels like there are more questions than answers."

Lisa shrugged. "Well, there's only one thing we can do about it to find out what's really up."

"And that is?" Cody asked.

"Find Keldeo, of course! And if he doesn't know the truth of the matter, then we ask Reshiram and Zekrom when you awaken them or whatever."

Cody sighed. "And what about when everything goes to hell like I know it's going to?"

"That's where I come into help you, my friend," Ryan said, casually using Cody's head to lean against. "What shall it be next now that you've mastered thunderbolt? Iron tail? Double team? Dig?"

"How about water pulse?" a new voice said.

None of them had been paying attention to the ocean, partly because the wind and spray that blew off of it had made them all naturally turn away from it to stay warm. They all jumped just a little at the addition to the conversation as they turned to see that Lapras had joined them.

But hey, Isola didn't completely panic at being startled for once. That's something, Cody thought to himself, though he quickly dismissed the thought as Lapras continued, "It's really quite a useful move. Of course, I imagine you didn't come all the way out here just to decide on what attack to learn, did you?"

"We didn't, but that's a great suggestion," Ryan mused. "Water pulse it is. I'm not great at it, but I know enough to teach it. We'll get right to it right after we talk to Keldeo."

"Keldeo?" Lapras questioned. "Isn't he something of a legend here? I was under the impression that he didn't exist."

"He does exist, but he disappeared a number of years back," Ryan explained, taking on his self-designated role as group spokespokemon. "We just found out that he's living on the island that these whirlpools surround, and that we need to speak to him."

Lapras suddenly smiled. "So there *is* an island past the whirlpools. I think I've seen it a couple times, but it was hard to say for sure. The whirlpools mess with the rise and fall of the ocean so much that I thought it might've been a large swell."

"So you haven't been there before?" Ryan asked, disheartened. "Now that we know the island's been kept secret, we though maybe you were in on it…"

"No, I haven't been there," Lapras said.

"Well, guess that's just too bad!" Cody said as his mood suddenly brightened. "Guess we'll just have to head back and wait for some other team to figure out a way to get there! Maybe we can join Team

Rebirth down at that archipelago place, if they still need help finding Virizion… Seemed like it'd be a nice island getaway."

To Cody's dismay, Lapras smiled and said, "I've stuck to the outer edges of the whirlpools because up until now, I thought there was a good chance that this whole area was filled with whirlpools. But knowing that there's an island there means there's someplace I can rest. I've become quite skilled at surfing the whirlpools all around here, and I know my limits; if there is indeed an island in the center of the whirlpools, then I should be able to get you there."

"Perfect!" Lisa said, perking up. "Can we head out right now?"

"Certainly. I'm always up for exploring someplace new," Lapras said. "Not to mention, it's been a while since I've swam anywhere even close to as challenging as the Sea of Time. Even the thought of going deeper into the whirlpools makes me excited."

"Sea of Time?" Ryan asked.

Lapras gave him a knowing wink. "As I believe I mentioned to you the last time you were here, I've had my share of adventures in my time. Now, hop on board and we'll get going."

Isola, Ryan, and Lisa quickly jumped onto Lapras's back, settling down so that they were all firmly seated and holding onto one of the spikes of his shell.

Cody hesitated for a moment. Then, relenting, he slowly crawled up onto Lapras's back. "This is the worst idea *ever* . And that means something, seeing as all I've seen since joining the team is bad idea after bad idea."

Right as he said that, Lapras pushed off and managed to hit wave in just the right way so that Cody was drenched with the freezing water.

"Sorry about that!" Lapras said. "But get used to it - in the whirlpools, I guarantee you're all going to get a bit wet."

"Great. Just great," Cody mumbled.

"Now, I suggest you all hold on tight!" Lapras said as he suddenly picked up speed, zooming towards the nearest whirlpool. "Here we go!"

All of a sudden, they found themselves tilting to one side as Lapras dipped within the rim of the nearest whirlpool, going at high speed as Lapras swam with the fast current.

Sheesh… This thing is bigger than I thought! Cody said, looking down towards the center. *Lapras is a big pokémon, but this thing dwarfs him in comparison! I mean, an entire steelix could stretch across it and still not reach both sides…*

He groaned. "What have I gotten myself into?"

After riding the current of the whirlpool to the other side, Lapras managed to loose himself from that whirlpool's grip, only to let himself be caught in one further in.

"Why don't you stay in the waters between the whirlpools?" Ryan shouted out, trying to be heard over the rush of water.

"They're too narrow, and too volatile!" Lapras shouted back, not turning his head so as to stay better focused on the task at hand. "And the last thing I want is to be caught going against the current of one of these whirlpools!"

"This was a terrible idea," Cody mumbled.

"What!" Lisa shouted.

"Nothing! I just hate my life, that's all!" Cody shouted back.

Though still holding on tightly, Lisa freed herself up enough to shrug. "That's no different from normal then, huh?"

Sadly, that's too true…

That was the last chance they had at conversation. As Lapras cunningly navigated from one whirlpool to the next, the whorls got stronger and deeper. Hearing anything other than the currents became all but impossible. No one really felt like speaking, anyway; their mix of awe and fear at the increasingly large whirlpools was enough to keep them occupied. Except for Lisa, who still occasionally shouted out something or other with an exhilarated look on her face.

This was so stupid, I never should've let them talk me into this, why couldn't we have ended up with a nice visit to the mountains, or those tropical islands, or even that desert place or whatever it is.

There was a lurch as Lapras exited one whirlpool only to very nearly get sucked into one he wasn't intending; some strong paddling on his part was all that managed to get them back on track.

God, I'm so sorry for every single thing I've ever done, just don't kill me here! I've already died once, and isn't that enough for you? Why me, why me, why me… How long until this is over? When are we finally going to get there?

It felt like it lasted forever, with each whirlpool bigger and more ominous than the last. There were times when Cody was literally sitting atop the sides of Lapras's back just to keep from falling off due to the angle of his swimming. Every time, Cody felt more and more certain that everything would end and Lapras would make a wrong movement and they'd all get thrown into a watery grave.

And then it was over. There was no gradual lessening of the intensity of the waters. At one moment, the whirlpool they had found themselves in was as big as ever, and Lapras's strength was clearly flagging. The next moment, they were in calm waters, drifting calmly along.

"Looks like your island really exists," Lapras said, clearly exhausted. "Good thing, too. I'm not sure that I could've kept that up for much longer."

"That was incredible!" Lisa shouted. "I knew you could do it! I mean, that was insane - I've never seen a pokémon swim like that!"

"I appreciate the compliment," He said as he altered his course and moved toward the mouth of a nearby river. However, he was jerked to a stop soon after entering.

"And it looks like this is as far as I go," he said. "The river is too shallow. You're on foot from here."

"Maybe we should swim around and look for another river?" Cody suggested, so tired that he didn't really want to move, even if it was only onto Isola's back instead. "This island's supposedly covered with rivers that all lead to the lake at its center. That's what Deputy Swadloon said, at least. We could find a deeper one-"

"I've seen enough similar islands to tell that there aren't likely to be any rivers deep enough for me. And either way, I'm exhausted," Lapras said. "But I do have one question before you leave."

"Yes?" Isola asked as she stepped off of Lapras's back and positioned herself so that the rest of her team could jump on.

Lapras turned to face them all, looking at Cody in particular. "Why exactly is it that you need to see Keldeo, again?'

Lisa was the one to answer. "Oh, you know, human needs to go save the world, bring balance back or something like that. Something you're familiar with, right?"

Lapras smiled. "Indeed I am. And in that case, best to quit the idle chit-chat. I'll be waiting for you all back here."

Ryan gave a joking salute as Isola started on her way. "Right you are, Sir! See you in a bit!" Then, settling back down for the ride, he said, "Well, the tough part is out of the way now, right? Just gotta follow the river to the lake, and Keldeo ought to be there. And it's not

even that big of an island. Still wishing that we were sent to that maze of islands, Cody?"

"I'm still freezing, and the wind is even worse here than it was at Tide-Battered Beach, and we all still nearly died," he said. "So yeah, islands still would've been preferable."

"We might as well make the most of the situation, don't you think?" Isola commented, trying to be optimistic. "It's really quite pretty here… Unlike the mainland we left from, which was completely iced over."

Cody looked around. There were no trees on the island to speak of. Only scrubby bushes and plants dotted the landscape, able to survive the cold yet iceless climate. And as far as he could tell, not a single pokémon lived here. "Pretty" wasn't exactly the word he's use to describe it. At best, the only thing pretty was the river that they ran alongside; Cody didn't think he'd ever seen water so clear.

He was still more caught up in the negatives than anything. "Why *isn't* this place all iced over anyway? It's way up north, and these rivers should be all frozen."

Ryan shrugged. "Guildmaster Mandibuzz said that the Four Warriors of Justice didn't have any special powers other than longevity, but I'm not buying it. Keldeo's a water type, right? Maybe he keeps everything thawed so the water can keep flowing."

"Or maybe it's his tie to Reshiram and Zekrom?" Isola suggested. "If so much of the ice on the land is Kyurem's doing, then their power should act as a counter to it… I think."

"Who cares?" Lisa said. "Let's just hurry up and get there! Maybe I can even convince Keldeo to battle me, and we'll see just how strong he is!"

"I feel like that'd be getting us off on the wrong foot- er, paw, or, um, hoof. I don't even know what the expression should be anymore,"

Cody said. Then, annoyed at himself, he changed the subject. "Anyway, Isola, I've been wondering… You seem more relaxed than usual."

Isola kept her eyes trained straight ahead. "Do I?"

"Yeah, you know, I noticed that too!" Ryan said. "So what's up? You seemed unusually calm at the Solstice Games."

"That's right - I remember you could barely hold still at the Solstice Games before these last ones!" Lisa chuckled. "All the pokémon around you freaked you out. This year, you at least got better as it went on. What gives?"

"Well… I don't know," Isola said, not very convincingly. "I just feel more at ease lately."

Ryan chuckled. "Sure it's not because you're around someone you've been liking more and more ever since he joined the team?"

"Ryan!" both Cody and Isola shouted out at once.

"It's, uh, nothing like that!" Isola insisted, glancing back nervously at Cody.

"Yeah, Ryan, cut it out with the jokes," Cody said, feeling a bit of embarrassment flood through him. "We're just teammates. Right, Isola?"

"R-right!" Isola practically squawked, reverting partially back to the jittery manner she'd had when Cody had first joined the team.

Ryan shook his head. "Ah, the ignorance of young, budding love."

"Hey, Cody, I think your fur gets spikier when you're embarrassed!" Lisa said as she playfully poked at Cody's fur. "I'll have to keep that in mind! Maybe I can use you as a weapon if your fur gets spiky enough. Ha! It's getting even worse now!"

"You're right!" Ryan said as he joined in the playful prodding. "And Isola's feathers are getting all ruffled, too."

Cody could've growled at them with how angry he was. *We are not a couple, and clearly Ryan and Lisa don't know what personal space is!* "Care to quit acting like children and stop poking me?"

"I dunno… This is pretty fun," Ryan said. "Of course, I might lay off a bit if a certain two pokémon just were honest with themselves. Life's too short to go around being embarrassed about who you like, don't you think?"

"Yeah, except I'm embarrassed because you're insinuating something that isn't true, *not* because it is true," Cody said. *It's nothing more than that, right?*

Cody looked up to Isola and, for the first time, it really hit him that maybe Isola *did* like him. From what he could gather, she'd been jittery all her life, and she'd been jittery when Cody had first joined the team. So what caused the change now? It had happened slowly, and it'd definitely been well into the process before the Solstice Games - that's just when it'd become the most obvious.

Am I really the reason she's calmer now? I mean, as much as he likes to tease, I've gotta admit that Ryan is really good at telling what pokémon are thinking. He called me out at the Solstice Games when I was being such a jerk to everyone. And speaking of which… He said back then that I was jealous of Isola talking to others… He didn't have a point, did he? Was I more upset over Isola than anyone else?

"Oi, Cody, you still with us?" Ryan said, poking him in the head now. Lisa joined in as well, apparently amused by this new way of torment. "You zoned out there for a minute. So, got anything to say to Isola?"

Annoyance once again flared up inside him, both at Ryan and Lisa's childishness and at his lack of understanding of his own feelings.

"So, how about it? Got anything to say about your feelings?" Ryan insisted.

An idea suddenly came to Cody's head. It was crazy and stupid, but he was annoyed enough that he didn't even care anymore.

And besides… I've wanted to do this since day one.

"You wanna know how I feel?" Cody asked, a smile growing on his face. "I feel like you two need to cool down for a bit!"

Even had they been expecting the headbutt that followed, there wasn't much that they could've done; Isola's back wasn't exactly wide enough to lend them much dodging room, after all. The two harassers were sent tumbling into the river that Isola was running alongside, once again drenched and cold just as they had been upon landing on this island.

"Why you little-!" Lisa started to shout as she immediately jumped up.

"Isola, run!" Cody said before Isola even quite had a chance to take in what had happened. "Run, run for my life! Lisa's going to kill me!"

Isola promptly picked up the pace, leaving the two much smaller, much slower pokémon far behind. And as she did so, she began to laugh as what Cody had done finally dawned on her. "You mean… You actually pushed them into the river? On *purpose* ?"

Cody started laughing, too. "Yeah, and it felt pretty darn good!" And, still laughing, he said, "I am SO dead when Lisa catches up, but they were getting on my nerves! How did you even put up with them before I came around?"

"They mean well enough. You know that," Isola said, slowing down to a more manageable trot now that they'd all but left the other half of their team behind.

There were a few moments of awkward silence. *What should I say now? I just wonder… Was Ryan telling the truth about her feelings? About* my *feelings? I don't even know anymore! I never even really had a serious crush on anyone when I was a human, and I'm a pokémon now, and I don't know how to go about this! Maybe-*

Before he could stop himself, he found himself blurting out, "Do you actually like me?"

Isola nearly tripped, so surprised was she by the question. She used the time it took her to recover to think, and eventually she answered quietly, "Of course I like you. We're teammates."

"Oh, you know what I mean," Cody said, looking down at the ground as it rushed past. "Like… You know, *like* like. What Ryan's been saying."

"Um, I, uh… I don't really know," Isola said, suddenly slowing to a stop as they found themselves at the edge of a giant lake, its surface so smooth that it was as if the wind couldn't touch it.

This was where Keldeo should be, of course. But he was nowhere immediately in sight, and at the moment, neither Cody nor Isola felt like he was quite as important as the conversation at hand.

Isola scratched at the cold ground nervously as she continued, "It's just, I don't know how to feel. Up until now, I've always… I've been preoccupied being scared of everything. Feeling like an outsider. Ryan and Lisa helped me out a lot by letting me onto their team some years ago. But… I've never been able to relax, not really. Not until recently… I don't know, I feel more relaxed around you? And I don't know if it's just because I like being around you, or if… you know, if it's more."

Cody didn't know how to respond.

"And, um… You?" Isola ventured, daring a glance back at him. "I mean, Ryan keeps on telling me you like me, but… You just see me

as a teammate, don't you?"

Her tone of voice wasn't necessarily disappointed; she just seemed to want confirmation.

Cody scratched his ear, trying to bide time to think. But he didn't have time; Isola had already asked the question. An answer was needed. "I guess… I guess I don't know, either," he said sheepishly. "I've mainly just been so focused on turning back into a human and getting back to my own world that I haven't thought about anything else."

Isola turned her head fully toward him and smiled. But there was something in the smile that didn't quite fit. *Sadness* ?

"I guess you *will* want to go back to your own world once this is all over," she said, sounding resigned. "So it probably doesn't even matter in the end. Your family and your own life is more important than us, of course."

"No, that's not what I mean!" Cody immediately responded. "I mean, I like you, and I like Team Misfits, but I like my family too, and I-"

"CODY, you rotten zigzagoon!" Lisa shouted, running towards them in the distance; Ryan trailed some ways behind her. "You'll pay for that!"

"What's the ruckus over here?"

Regardless of the threat approaching from behind, both Cody and Isola turned towards the lake, where the new voice had come from. Much to their surprise, a pokémon about Isola's height seemed to be skating across the water's surface towards them at an incredible speed. It's furry frills of light blue and red made it look rather silly, at least in Cody's mind; this was enhanced by the fact that it was essentially a unicorn.

Horn, hooves, rather unimpressive-looking… Yup, that's how Swadloon described Keldeo.

Knowing that Keldeo's arrival was maybe the only thing that would distract Lisa from her retribution, Cody called out to the fast approaching pokémon. "Hi! Hope we're not intruding or nothin', but we were told we needed to find you! You're Keldeo, right?"

"Yup, that's me!" Keldeo said right as he skidded to a stop, blasting water from his hooves to stop himself. He was seemingly unperturbed by having visitors on his island. If anything, he acted excited. "And you…" He suddenly focused in his gaze on Cody and then, without warning, blasted water from his hooves to propel himself a few feet into the air. "You're a human, aren't you! I can tell! I've been waiting for you! Waiting a long, long, long time… I was getting bored!"

Cody smiled sheepishly, doing his best to ignore Lisa as he heard her come to a stop beside them, somewhat out of breath. *Best not to draw her attention to me… Keep attention on Keldeo.* "Yeah, I'm a human. The name's Cody, and we're Team Misfits. I hear I'm supposed to be waking up Reshiram and Zekrom, or something like that?"

"That's right!" Keldeo said. "And what about the other human? Is he - or she, I guess, I don't know - looking for the other keys to wake up Reshiram? I've got one of the keys to Zekrom, by the way."

"Well, um, yeah, you could say that they're looking for the other keys," Cody said, a little bit confused. "There's a few of us humans-turned-pokémon looking, just for the record."

Keldeo frowned and plopped himself down in the shallow waters, apparently not bothered by the cold. "A few? Like, there's not just two humans?"

"Um, no?" Cody said. "There's definitely at least five of us, though Emma kinda got captured by Kyurem…"

"What?" Keldeo said, an alarmed look on his face. "You mean Kyurem is actually on the rampage?"

Ryan sauntered up and, immediately jumping into the conversation, said, "Nothing like that, but he did have the weather gods under his control. We humans managed to snap those three out of it, but we still don't know what happened to Emma… And the ice is still progressing southward, though you might've known that."

"Yeah, I did," Keldeo said, poking at the water with a hoof, clearly unhappy. "It's only been with a lot of effort on my part and some help from the power Kyurem granted me that I've been able to keep this island and my own whirlpools from freezing… But enough of that! I didn't realize there were gonna be a bunch of humans here, which kind of poses a problem, because Reshiram and Zekrom were expecting only their two heroes to come, but-"

"Slow down a bit, buddy!" Lisa said. "I don't follow. Heroes?"

"Well, point is, we should go help that other human somehow!" Keldeo said. "I hate just sitting around when someone is in trouble. And all I've been doing for *years* is sitting around, but now you're finally here! So I just have to test you, and then we can go and actually *do* something about it!"

Cody gulped audibly. "Um… Test me?"

Keldeo nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, don't worry. It's just a battle. More of a formality than anything. Reshiram and Zekrom suspected that you'd probably bring pokémon with you in order to get this far, and they wanted us to be sure that you were ready for the responsibility of taking the key to the stones. I don't think they were exactly planning on the humans being pokémon too, but that's okay, it just means you get to join in on the battle. But anyway, yeah, your team can battle with you is my point!"

"You pokémon and your obsession with battling…" Cody grumbled. *How does it prove anything? I swear, I'll never know…*

"All right, bring it on!" Lisa shouted. "I was hoping for a battle!"

Keldeo grinned. "This should be fun! But don't worry, I'll go easy on you." He suddenly leapt back some ways further into the lake and, despite the fact that he didn't appear to be using his water-propelled hooves to keep himself up, nonetheless stayed upright. Apparently, the lake was only an inch or two deep even that far in.

"I'll give you guys the first move!" shouted Keldeo.

"This guy's taking us too lightly!" Lisa said as she rushed forward, her fist coated with electricity.

Ryan, Isola, and Cody all glanced at each other.

"Well, guess this is really happening," Ryan said with a shrug. "Let's go!" He ran forward, and Isola followed suit. Cody stayed on her back, prepared to leap off and attack once they got closer.

Lisa, of course, reached the target first. But right as she threw her punch, Keldeo darted out of the way and swiped at her with his horn, using it almost like a sword. The tip sliced across her shoulder and partway down her back, cutting through tough hide like it was nothing.

Lisa stumbled and fell to her knees, her blood clouding the otherwise pristine water. Ryan and Isola both came to a stunned stop, looking at Lisa in horror.

I've never seen Lisa taken down so quickly… Hell, I've barely seen her taken down at all. And judging by the looks on Ryan and Isola's faces, I'd say they haven't either.

"Whoops! Guess I got a little carried away!" Keldeo said, though he hardly sounded ashamed of this fact. "She's so tiny that I guess I went a bit deeper than I was planning."

With some effort, Lisa got back to her feet. "You son of a muk," she said. "I'm going to kill you for that."

"Not by yourself you aren't," Ryan said as he and Isola quickly made their way over to her, Cody still on Isola's back.

"Yes by myself I am!" Lisa said as she ran forward again in spite of her injury.

Ryan sighed. "All right, Isola, you get out of the water - I don't want you getting caught up in our next attack. Cody, you and me are going in for a close range double-thunderbolt as soon as the opportunity arises. Got it?"

Cody had absolutely no hope for the battle, but he jumped down from Isola's back anyway. "Guess there's no turning back now," he said. "And besides… Something about seeing Lisa hurt like that just doesn't sit right with me."

Ryan glanced back to see that Isola had already made it out of the water. "Same here," he replied. "So why don't we show this guy who's boss?"

"This guy's going to kill us on accident, but sure, why the hell not?" Cody said as he and Ryan began to run over to where the battle was continuing. Lisa had done a little bit better this time around; a well-placed ice punch had frozen the water enough to upset Keldeo's balance, giving her an opportunity to land a powerful thunderpunch right on Keldeo's neck.

But she was already flagging from loss of blood. As Ryan and Cody arrived within striking range, they watched Keldeo rise after the attack, obviously injured but not close to being down from the count. He charged at her, apparently ready to stab right into her, when-

"Now!"

Ryan and Cody released the static electricity they'd been storing in their fur, their own individual bolts combining to hit Keldeo in a powerful strike of lightning. The cost of their success was that Lisa was close enough for the attack to arc through the water to her as well, knocking the already weakened kangaskhan out.

Cody grimaced, but Ryan seemed almost satisfied. "If she kept on exerting herself, she was going to lose too much blood. Isola, could you go get her? Cody and I will handle Keldeo."

"You will, will you?" Keldeo asked, rising from his knees as Isola wordlessly heeded Ryan's suggestion. Keldeo's body was visibly trembling from the shock, yet he still seemed completely in control of his actions nonetheless. And, moreover, completely able to fight. "We'll see about that. I'm not giving you the chance to fire off another electric attack!"

Keldeo charged and, despite their best efforts to get out of the way, they didn't have a chance against his speed. This time, it was Ryan who got hit by the horn, a shallow slice dying the fur of his stomach red.

Anger flared inside of Cody like a fire as Ryan struggled to stay on his feet. The feeling of outrage reminded him of when he'd been at the Solstice Games, when he had turned around to help Vulpix even though he'd known he was facing certain defeat. But this was even stronger. This wasn't just some shy vulpix he barely knew. This was Team Misfits.

Ryan, injured but not incapacitated, tried to counter with an iron tail, and did manage to hit one of Keldeo's legs. But before Cody could run over and help, Keldeo had already recovered and had sent Ryan flying with one whack of a water-cloaked tail.

Cody stopped to watch the body fall, and watched anxiously to see if the minccino would be okay. To his relief, Ryan sat up in a few moments, but he was clearly too injured to do much more than that.

In the meantime, Keldeo was nonchalantly stretching his injured leg. "I've gotten rusty after sitting on this island for so long," he said. Then, looking at Cody with a grin, said, "You still dare to come at me, human?"

"I'm coming to help!" Isola shouted as she dashed into the water.

But that was the last straw for Cody. *First Lisa, then Ryan… They might be mean at times, but I do NOT like seeing them injured like this! And I'm definitely not letting that happen to Isola!*

Before Isola could catch up, he charged through the shallow water straight towards Keldeo, relying on the attack he knew best: headbutt. Keldeo stood his ground, meeting the charging pokémon's eyes as he got closer and closer.

Then, at the very last moment, Keldeo broke eye contact and raised a hoof, blasting Cody with just enough pressure to make him grind to a halt.

"That's enough! You pass the test!" Keldeo said.

Cody regained his footing and stayed on-edge, not quite believing it. "Um, what?"

"Sorry if I had to get a bit rough," Keldeo said, sobering up a little. "But I wanted to make sure you still had the guts to face me after I injured your friends. I'm a bit better with my swordmanship than I maybe let on - I assure you that I did enough damage to knock them out and no more. No permanent injuries."

Cody glared at Keldeo. "There has *got* to be a better way to tell if I have the guts to face you than that."

Keldeo looked crestfallen. "Sorry, but that's the best I could come up with. I'm not as good at judging pokémon as Cobalion, Terrakion, and Virizion are… They're a lot more perceptive than I am. But

anyway, the good news is…" Keldeo trailed off and suddenly turned his head to look in the direction of the mainland.

"… is what?" Isola asked as she came over, Ryan and Lisa both lying on her back.

Keldeo's eyes widened. "Oh no… Someone… Something has broken through my whirlpools. Frozen them completely solid. I was distracted, sure, but that can't be possible…" Then, turning back to Cody and Isola, said, "I'm sorry, I'd explain more, but we're in big trouble." He lowered his head suddenly and, with a kick of his own hoof, broke off more than half of his own horn. "That's what you're going to need to get the Dark Stone to awaken Zekrom. You need to take that and get it out of here as fast as you can. I'll hold off whatever is coming."

He turned to leave, but Isola stopped him before he could go. "Are you sure you'll be all right? You took quite a bit of damage during that battle, surely…"

"I'll be fine," Keldeo said, smiling encouragingly. "Besides, I'm one of the Warriors of Justice. We're called warriors for a reason! I held back with you all, but I won't against whatever it is that's coming. The important thing is to get that horn out of here, just in case I'm not successful. Now, hurry on back and get away from here! It's closer than I realized!"

As he darted off, Isola, Ryan, and Cody all looked off at where he was headed and saw some figure moving quickly towards them. Whatever it was, it was somewhat taller than Keldeo himself; other than that, they couldn't decipher anything about it from this distance.

"I don't like this, Cody," Isola said. "Grab his horn and get on. We should do as he says."

"Already on it," he said.

As soon as he was up and secure, Ryan - though only barely able to stay upright at this point - said, "All right, lets get out of here."

Isola darted off at top speed, so that Cody had to do his best both to keep hold of the horn and keep Lisa from falling off; Ryan was already having trouble enough keeping himself on, since he had his own injuries to contend with. As Cody managed all that, he also kept a wary eye on the two shapes quickly receding into the distance. Both were incredibly fast, such that Isola had barely left the water's edge by the time the two clashed.

Sheesh… Was Keldeo ever right about holding back . Though it was hard to say for sure what was happening, it was certain that Keldeo was doing more than the graceful little sidesteps and slices of before. A giant jet of water hit one of the figures as Cody watched; he guessed it was one of Keldeo's attacks, maybe a hydropump or something like that. In another moment, some sort of ball of light was sent flying back the other way, hitting its own target.

An energy ball? So it's a grass type? And… It's got four legs, it looks like, and… There's another attack, an ice beam…? Or is it a a hyper beam? A solarbeam? I wish I knew more about attacks right now… I might be able to guess a lot more.

Just before they got too far for Cody to make out anything at all, he saw one of the figures fall. The victorious figure promptly turned and headed straight towards them.

But those horns - antlers? - they're not Keldeo's unicorn horn and his frills. And it looks too tall. That's… Keldeo didn't win.

"Isola, pick up the pace!" Cody said, spitting out the horn momentarily. "It's coming after us, and it's gaining!"

Isola ran faster, but it was nowhere near fast enough to outpace this larger pokémon. Cody watched in horror as it came closer and closer, each detail of it slowly becoming more defined.

Cody had seen sawsbuck before, and though he had yet to see any of them in their winter form, he guessed that this was what they must look like - same build, but with thick white billows of hair coming off the chest and antlers stark and unadorned. But this wasn't a regular sawsbuck, that much he could tell. The entirety of its coat was a blindingly pure white such as Cody had never seen on any pokémon; he doubted it was normal. That aside, its antlers and hooves seemed to be made entirely of ice.

As it came ever closer, more details came into view. He soon realized that the whiteness of the fur came from the fact that it wasn't fur at all. Rather, it seemed to be made entirely of ice which, though flexible like hair, retained its glimmering quality. The eyes themselves seemed almost blank, as if they too were covered with ice. And then-

No. No, it can't be.

Cody very nearly lost a hold of the horn in surprise. It was so simple, so unremarkable a detail on the sawsbuck, yet it was enough that there could be no doubt. The sawsbuck's left ear was partly gone, seemingly burned off by some attack.

"It's… It's Emma!"

"What?" Isola squawked.

But Cody didn't have time to explain. At that moment, a sphere of white light gathered between Emma's horns and shot a tangle of energy forward. The powerful ice beam hit Isola's legs, almost immediately covering both of them in a casing of ice. Isola cried out as she tumbled to the ground, sending her occupants flying.

Cody had seen the attack coming just in time, though, and was ready for it. He jumped off right before the ice beam hit and dashed off in another direction, the horn in his mouth. Emma didn't immediately come after him; perhaps she'd been so focused on following Isola that she didn't realize that the horn and him were both gone.

This is by far the stupidest, stupidest idea ever, but… But maybe I can draw Emma off before she does any more damage to the rest of the team! If I stick around there, Ryan will try to fight, and Isola will if she can move, and Lisa will if she wakes up, and I can't let that happen! Ryan and Lisa are already too injured, and-

An energy ball crashed to the ground near his head, the resulting explosion of energy almost knocking Cody off his feet.

Guess she found me again.

But he kept running, zigzagging as he naturally did, which helped for a time to keep the faster pokémon from catching up.

Maybe she's just after the horn. There's no sense in both the horn getting caught and me getting hurt, if so. Maybe…

He was coming up on one of the many rivers that flowed from the central lake.

All right, now!

He dropped the horn into the water, and it sunk into the shallows as Cody kept running, not daring to turn back. He heard the galloping of the icy hooves stop for a moment. But even then, he kept running, not daring to take anything for granted.

Maybe if I get out of sight before she thinks of me again, then-

The galloping picked up again, and it was unmistakably heading in Cody's direction. He put on a burst of speed, but knew it wouldn't be enough.

Guess she was after me after all, and the horn was just a side prize. Or maybe I'm just the side prize. Or maybe Kyurem knew someone would eventually come to claim the horn, and was waiting for this chance. Or maybe-

The maybes no longer mattered. Emma shot off another icebeam, and it hit Cody in the back right around his shoulders, partially freezing him. He stumbled, his forelegs no longer able to move properly as he suffered through the terrible pain of the cold.

One last chance… I'm not going down without a fight!

He concentrated and worked up the best electrical charge he could, then let the lightning loose in all directions, hoping to hit the sawsbuck that was somewhere behind him. The attack had the nice side-effect of shattering the worst of the ice that coated him, but it was too little too late. Before he could get to his feet, a splitting pain went through him as an icy hoof crashed down on his head, sending him into the darkness of unconsciousness.

It took some time for Isola to peck through the worst of the outer layer of ice, and some more time still to regain even minimal use of her legs. The fall from Isola's back mixed with his other already outstanding injuries had been enough to knock Ryan out, and Lisa was still out from earlier. In essence, Isola was alone, trapped by her own useless legs as worry and fear grew with each passing moment that Cody didn't return.

"Please no," she murmured to herself as she finally wobbled to her feet and headed off in the direction she'd seen Cody go. "Please no. Please let him be okay. Or please let him even just be injured. Nothing more. Let him just be here. If that was Emma… He can't end up like that."

She continued on, picking up speed as the blood began to circulate properly through her legs again.

"Cody! Cody!" She shouted out his name again and again, until her voice started to grow hoarse.

Isola searched until night fell, but no matter how much she called his name or ran up and down the island, the zigzagoon didn't appear.

She would have kept on searching, but the rest of the team was still injured. They were still counting on her. She knew that. Lapras would be waiting, hopefully; he could carry them all back to the guild, and they'd get treated.

As for Cody… She wasn't going to delude herself. Isola was tall, and this island had little place to hide. Even if Cody was just knocked out somewhere on the island, she would have found him by now.

A tear fell from her eyes as she wearily returned to where the rest of her team was no doubt still lying on the ground.

"Cody…"

The howling of the north wind was the only reply that came from the cold and darkness that surrounded her.

Well, that's a downer of a chapter ending…

Anyway, a few things I want to touch on. First, long chapter is long. I apologize, but it's SO FREAKING HARD to write 4+ characters at once. And I also just wasn't very concentrated on this chapter until it got to Keldeo. So yeah. (Looks like I'll only be dealing with a three pokémon team now, though… That's good, I guess?)

Second, I want to say that, if fanfiction[dot]net's traffic stats are accurate at all, this story is already immensely popular, probably moreso than Language of Life. Seriously, 60+ visitors to the last chapter in the three days since it came out? And 100+ for the chapter before it in the less than two weeks since it came out? I don't completely trust this site's stats, but they've gotta be somewhat close… So seriously, guys, thanks; I'm glad so many of you are enjoying it. And though I haven't been saying it much and haven't really been replying to every single review (sorry!), I do want to say thanks for all the support and suggestions that I've gotten via reviews and messages. It means a lot to me, even if I don't always emphasize how much it means.

Thirdly, I've been considering trying to network this story more, get it some more exposure and hopefully get some more criticism from the pokémon community. While you're more than welcome to point this out to other's yourself if you frequent any pokémon forums, I was wondering if anyone had suggestions for good sites I could join to this end? (This may or may not happen, but still, suggestions are welcome.) Message me or tell me in a review, but make sure to be sneaky about writing down the site name! For example, use [dot]com instead of an actual . com in order to not have it just wiped from your message.

Chapter 18: Max

Chapter Eighteen: Max

Shadows danced upon the cavern walls as Zeke led the way through Mountain Warrens, his star-shaped tail tip held high as it illuminated their surroundings. Though his own eyes were keen enough for him to see even in this complete darkness, the light was more necessary for the archen and galvantula who silently followed him in their search for Terrakion.

I know she doesn't like me that much since I was such a coward the first time we met, but the quiet treatment is killing me! Max thought to himself as he walked along, occasionally stealing a glance over at the galvantula. *And it's been like this as we've wandered the caverns these past couple days… It's getting annoying talking with Zeke as if she's not even there. Maybe today will finally be different?*

"So, um… Your name is Kara, right?" Max asked tentatively. He saw Zeke cast a skeptical and amused glance back at him; after all, Max's past attempts at getting the galvantula to be friendlier had been less than successful.

"Not every pokémon just goes by their names as casually as you humans do," she replied harshly, not even looking over at him. "Just stick with Galvantula, or we'll have a problem."

He forced out a chuckle, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "All right, all right. Galvantula it is. Now, I know you don't like me all that much-"

"Got that right," Galvantula interrupted.

"So why exactly did you come along with the two of us if you don't like me?" Max asked.

"Just because I think you're a coward doesn't mean I think your buddy Luxray is," Galvantula said, meeting Zeke's eyes as he turned

to look back at her. "Unlike some pokémon, you were a real help back when that monferno and her gang had it out for us, Luxray."

Zeke grinned. "As much as I appreciate the compliment, you're not giving Max here enough credit," he said. "He did his fair bit of work that day, just not against that monferno. And after all, isn't he the reason the two of us evolved? Don't you think he should have your gratitude for that, little Miss Angry-Sparks?"

She fell to his goading and gave off some of her telltale sparks of annoyance. "Yeah, like he deserves credit for that. You didn't even purposefully help us evolve, right?"

"Er, yeah," Max admitted, glad that she Galvantula at least talking to him, albeit in her rather harsh, judgmental sort of way. "Still don't really know how it happens. But pokémon often evolve in high-stress situations, right? So it probably had something to do with that, and I just helped it along. Either way, I'm glad I could help, even if it was unintentional."

"Hmph. Doesn't matter if you're glad, you still didn't mean to do it," Galvantula said. "And why is it that the other humans can't do it, too, huh?"

Max shrugged. "Beats me."

"And why is it that all you humans are here in our world causing trouble in the first place?" Galvantula questioned further.

"Still don't know," Max said, wincing a bit at her harshness; he knew that she was purposefully asking questions that he didn't know the answer to. *Still, at least she's speaking to us now.* "I mean, I guess we must be here to wake up Reshiram and Zekrom. Doesn't explain how it happened, but that's the only reason I've seen so far for us to be here. Other than that, we've all just been wandering and doing missions or just being here."

Galvantula finally turned to look at him. "Yes, but why *you* of all people? I mean, Emma's a genius battler, so it's almost like she was meant to be here, so I don't question it. And I heard that vulpix is quite the prodigy as well. But why pokémon like you and that zigzagoon and that flighty little pidgey? Not exactly the sort of pokémon I would choose to correct the balance of the world."

Max tried to ignore her rudeness. "Well… I've always figured that it's to make up for the one thing I did as a human that I can remember. You know, try to do enough good to make up for it. That's why I joined the guild. It's a sort of penance, I guess."

"Penance? You never told me you thought about it like that," Zeke said disapprovingly. "That's-"

"Wait wait wait. You can only remember one thing?" Galvantula said. "What's that?"

Max unconsciously tensed a bit. "I'd rather not talk about it. It's not exactly a pleasant memory."

"Aw, come on," Galvantula urged. "You can't just mention it and not tell us. Just-"

"He doesn't need to tell us if he doesn't want to," Zeke said, coming to a stop and glaring at Galvantula. "If anything, *we* should be the ones digging into *your* past. After all, you tagged along with us without hardly even asking if it was okay."

"Calm down a bit, sheesh," Galvantula said. "All I'm saying is that he can't be all that serious about his stupid penance if he's not even willing to talk about his past. Hiding it is just the same as running from it."

Max was feeling more and more uncomfortable as Zeke countered, "Just because he doesn't want to share them with a nosy bug like yourself doesn't mean he's hiding it."

Galvantula grinned knowingly. "I bet he just hasn't told you yet either, and you're curious, but you don't have the guts to ask."

Zeke stayed calm, not letting her get to him. "That's hardly the case, though it's true that he hasn't told me. Right, Max? She can mind her own business."

"Actually… I dunno. Maybe she's right," Max said. Over the last few days, there had been lots of time just walking through the darkness in silence, and that time had given Max more time to think than since he'd first shown up in this world.

Every time I think about why I'm doing this, I…

"What do you mean, Max?" Zeke asked. "Galvantula is just trying to get to you because she's a jerk and-"

"But I honestly do think she's kinda right," Max said, rather unhappily. "Every time my mind drifts to that memory, I just sorta… Block it out. I won't let myself think about it. I mean, I keep on telling myself I want to make up for that time, but I can't even face the memory itself."

Galvantula was starting to look a bit guilty. "You know, I was just kidding. You don't really have to tell us anything. Guess I'm just a bit grumpy about Emma being missing and all, so forget I even mentioned it."

Silence engulfed them; except for the very different sounds of their feet against the ground and the occasional sound of some other pokémon farther within the labyrinth of caves, nothing disturbed their thoughts.

But eventually, it was Zeke who said, "But you know, Max… If this something is really bugging you, and it's really so bad that you don't even like thinking about it, you're welcome to tell me. It's not really good to keep things like that to yourself. Remember that story I told you about my sister and I, how we were stupid and fought that bully

ursaring? For a long time afterward, I blamed myself for my sister's injury. It wasn't 'til I opened up about it that I realized that we were both young and stupid and it wasn't really anyone's fault except for that ursaring."

"But that's just the thing," Max said. "What happened to my sister was much more serious, and I-" he stopped himself, took a breath, and calmed himself a bit. *Finally started to get Galvantula to talk, and now I'm going to bring the whole conversation down into the gutter with my stupid past.* "I think being in the caves has just gotten to me, being a flying type and all… even though I can't actually fly. When do you think we'll find the next entrance to the outside?"

"We've been going up for a while…" Zeke said, though it was clear he wasn't about to let the subject drop so easily. "We should reach the outside soon, I'd think. But really, Max-"

"I'm fine, really!" he said, reverting back to his normal, cheerful self. "Just don't worry about me. Right now, we should focus on finding Terrakion. So do you think he'll be on a mountaintop, or somewhere-"

"Aw, just shut it," Galvantula interrupted, as critical as ever and yet somehow not quite so mean-spirited as before. "You're clearly *not* fine. You're worse than the pokémon of my valley, not wanting anyone to help them at all even when we're practically being killed. Do you want me to run ahead so you two can talk about your problems in privacy? I can do that, but just hurry it up 'cuz I want to find Emma as soon as possible. Catch up when you've grown up a bit."

She scuttled forward, lighting her fur up with her own, less powerful flash attack.

Max ran ahead a few steps before she could get far. "Wait, there's really no need to do that! It's not…" He trailed off when he saw that she was just going further and further ahead, obviously not listening to him. "This place is a labyrinth, we'll get separated and…" She was

nearly around a bend now and still not listening. "Oh, all right, I'll talk about it, but you don't need to leave for it!"

That got her attention. She promptly turned around and returned, a smug look in her eyes as she fell back within the light of Zeke's tail. "All right, then, spill it."

Zeke growled at her quietly, growing more annoyed with her by the minute. "Were you planning on him doing that?"

"No, but it worked out rather well, huh?" Galvantula said. "Anyway, your buddy is right, and keeping stuff in without talking about it is bad. Not like I'm any great judge of characters or anything, but that's what I've heard. So you might as well tell us. Luxray here probably won't judge you for whatever it is. I'll make no such promises, but I *can* keep quiet about it if you're not wanting it to get around."

Zeke looked over to Max. "You do realize that you don't have to tell either me or this manipulative little bug anything, right?"

Max scratched his beak thoughtfully and, by chance, happened to feel the groove that now scarred its center. *It's not hurting anymore, so I nearly forgot about it… But Zeke saved me back then when that scyther was after me, and he's been a great friend since then. He at least deserves to know what I can remember about myself. And Galvantula… She's a bit mean-spirited, but I think she means well. At the very least, she's proven herself to be loyal to a fault when defending Emma; I think she'll at least keep to her promise of not spreading the story.*

"It's fine, it's fine," Max said, feeling a strange mix of relief and dread now that he'd finally decided to tell the story. "After all, I abandoned Emma right when Galvantula was wanting to save her. I guess you deserve to hear the why, Galvantula… That it's just sort of how I am. And you definitely deserve to hear it, Zeke."

"Then go ahead and get on with it," Galvantula said. "We don't have all day. Or whatever time it is, I dunno anymore in these stupid

caves."

Max took another breath to calm himself, then began in a quiet voice, "Well… Back when I was a human, I had a little sister. And it was around a time of year when all us humans would give each other presents, so I took her to Shopping Mall Nine, which- er, I guess you wouldn't even know what a mall is. It's, like… Imagine a place like the Southern Guild, where there's floor upon floor that you can be on, and each floor has lots of stuff you can buy."

As he said it, the memory came back to him vividly. His little sister had never been to a shopping mall nearly this big, and so she'd wanted to dress up like a big girl. She'd been wearing a bright, floral-print dress, and she carried a little, mostly empty purse over one arm. She was only six years old.

"I was with her the entire time, staying with her as she went to pick out what she wanted," he continued. "And then… Everything went wrong."

The dark of the cave around him suddenly reminded him of the dimness inside the mall when all the lights had gone off. And the weight of the mountain above him, or at least the knowledge it was there - it was like the building all over again as it rumbled and began to collapse.

Unconsciously, his voice sped up as his heart rate rose. "I don't remember exactly the reasons, but some group of people had planted bunches of voltorb at points in the building so that it would collapse, killing as many people as possible. None of us knew what was going on, and everyone started fleeing towards the stairs. I got caught up in the panic, too. I grabbed my sister's hand and started pulling her with me."

The musty cave air was now like the rubble and smoke-filled air of the mall as it began to collapse, with thousands of people still inside, and he and his sister just two of that multitude.

Zeke, seeing Max's near panic, reached out a paw and touched him on the wing. "Max, you don't have to go on if-"

But I can't stop now… If I stop, I'll just be crushed, caught up in it! "Her hand slipped out of mine. I didn't even realize it until I heard her scream as she started crying, probably too scared now that she was separated from me. And I… I didn't stop. I was a big guy and I could've pushed back through the crowd. She wasn't too far behind me. And another few seconds probably wouldn't have mattered. We were on a low floor; we could've gotten out, together. But I-"

"Max, really, cut it out," Zeke said, more forcefully this time. "You're just panicking yourself for no reason, and-"

"-but I just left her," Max continued, heedless of Zeke's warnings. But that was the climax of his panic; he suddenly seemed to deflate as he sat down on the ground, looking at the wing that at one time had been the human arm that had let his sister go. "I just left her. I was rationalizing it in my head as I ran. I was thinking that she'd follow the rest of the crowd, there was no reason I had to go back and get her even though she was young and everyone was so scared that…"

He shook his head forlornly. He could remember running even once he got out of the building, and he kept running and kept running, not even looking back for his sister, not even waiting to see if she got out of the building itself. "I got out alive, and most everyone from the lower floors got out alive. But not her. It wasn't the building that killed her. It was the people. She was trampled by people like me, just caring about themselves. I can't even say if I might've done the same to some poor person who tripped. I wasn't paying attention to anyone but myself."

And then… I was far away from the building when I finally turned around, and I only did it then because I couldn't run another step. And that was the first time since I'd heard her scream that I'd even thought of her.

"That's it. That's all I remember of my human life," Max said. "And I know that even in my human life I tried to make up for it, but I couldn't… I don't remember anything specific, but I know I tried. And apparently I couldn't. That's why I figured I woke up here, with only that memory. To just keep trying to make up for what I did that day."

Both Zeke and Galvantula were silent for a moment. Zeke eventually said, "But none of that is your fault, and-"

"What are you talking about? Of course it's his fault," Galvantula said.

This time, the growl that rumbled to being in the luxray's throat was full and loud enough to echo in the cavern. "I'm honestly about ready to rip one of your legs off. Can't you try being a bit more sympathetic?"

"Well, I'm not gonna *lie* about it, if that's what you're asking," Galvantula said. Turning to Max, she said, "I mean, of course the whole place being blown up wasn't your fault. It's not like you *tried* to kill anyone, so you're by far not a bad pokémon or anything, in my opinion. But you messed up big time, it sounds like."

"If we weren't friends, you'd be saying the same thing, too," Max said to Zeke as he stood up straighter and started walking, trying to gain back some of his cheeriness. "Thanks for sticking up for me, but it's okay. I know what I did, and I know that I've gotta make up for it. That's gotta be why I became a pokémon, and it's why I joined the guilds and why I want to help find Terrakion and the others. I *will* make up for it."

"But that's stupid, too," Galvantula commented.

Zeke turned on her, seemingly about ready to snap. "Can't you say even *one* thing that's supportive?"

The galvantula didn't seem worried by his anger. "I'm just saying, it's stupid to treat life like one giant act of penance. It's great to use the

past as motivation, but you oughta be doing it for yourself, to make yourself a better pokémon. Or human, or whatever. I bet *you* even agree with me on that point, right Luxray?"

He calmed himself and continued walking forward yet again. "Actually… Yeah. You can't be happy with life if you keep on focusing on something like that, can you?"

"Well, I'm happy enough," Max said, "just so long as I don't think about it."

Zeke frowned. "But that's just running away from it again."

"What do you want me to do, then?" Max asked, noticing that the cave was slowly getting lighter; ahead of him, he could see light glinting off the rocks at a turn in the cave. The thought of being in open air again, even for a bit, helped him to relax somewhat despite the fact that the conversation was still in uncomfortable territory.

"Do what I was saying, obviously," Galvantula said. "Remember, but move on. If you're gonna stop being such a coward, do it 'cuz you want to, not because you think the universe is making you."

Max didn't respond for a few moments, closing his eyes as he followed Zeke only by ear. *Of course, it seems so easy when you say that, but… I'm just not sure if I can. That's the only thing I remember of myself before all this happened; it's all I have to base myself around. And why would I remember only that if it wasn't important to who I am?*

"Well?" Zeke prodded as the group finally emerged into sunlight, just outside one of the many cave mouths that dotted the island's enormous mountains.

Max opened his eyes, and with a hopeful smile said, "I can try, I guess. But I'm not sure how easily-"

"Great! Glad to hear it," Galvantula interrupted; Max suspected that she was purposefully stopping him before he could voice his doubts. "And you know what? I feel weird being so formal with idiots like you two. I guess you might as well call me Kara. Plus, Zeke is a better name than Luxray, so I'll be calling you that. And Max is Max, so that doesn't need to change."

Zeke flicked his tail and didn't respond, but there was a slight grin on his face, either amused or bemused by Kara's strange mix condescension and friendliness.

Though she certainly can be rather offensive, Max thought, *I'm glad that she's loosening up a bit. At the very least, the rest of the search should be more enjoyable.*

"So, where to next?" Zeke said, looking up at the mountains that surrounded them. "Max, isn't it your turn to pick?"

What?" Max said, momentarily still distracted by the conversation up until then. "Oh, right. Um… That one!" He pointed to a cave mouth at the base of one of the smallest mountains they'd seen. The cave entrance itself was rather hard to see from their vantage point, since more trees were near the base of the mountains than were at the higher, rockier elevations.

Kara rolled her eyes. "You're just trying to be lazy now, aren't you? Choosing the smallest mountain…"

"Yeah, maybe a bit," Max admitted. "But I've got a good feeling about it! Doesn't it just look like a place that some pokémon might hide?"

"Not when there are bigger, more impressive mountains to choose from."

"It's Max's call, regardless of the reason," Zeke said. "Let's go!"

He dashed down the mountainside recklessly, apparently feeling just as good as Max about finally being back outside again. Not to be

outdone, Kara quickly followed him, staying surprisingly close behind him despite her smaller size.

Though a good runner himself, Max had already found that the mountains were a great place to practice his flying; not to mention, gliding above the steep, unstable slopes was quite a bit faster than even Zeke and his running. He opened his wings and leapt off the edge of the cliff, controlling his fall in a rather well-practiced glide.

It's still not flying, but Alexa's tips certainly helped, he thought, though the enjoyable rush of air streaming past his beak wasn't enough to make him forget about the memory he'd finally worked up the courage to speak of.

He tried to shake off the feeling of guilt the memory had conjured. But he couldn't; Kara's words about trying to run from it only came to mind, making him more unsettled. *It's just… They can say I* should *accept the past all they want, but that doesn't change anything. As much as I want to be strong for myself, the past is always going to nag me. I'm always going to be trying to make up for it. And as long as I keep running from danger, I'll never be able to repay that debt.*

Max was so distracted that he nearly crashed into one of the trees near the caves entrance, not having slowed himself down enough beforehand. He swerved at the last minute and swooped into the cave, expecting to crash to the ground.

But he didn't. Though they were already at the base of the mountain, this tunnel went downwards at a steep angle, almost like a giant, natural slide. Before he could quite comprehend things, he was gliding farther and farther down into the darkness.

He tried to flap his wings and land, but he was a second too late; already blind in the darkness, he adjusted his path a tad incorrectly and ended up crashing into the wall.

"Max! Are you okay?" Zeke shouted from somewhere near the entrance.

Guess he heard the crash, Max thought as he rubbed his beak. It had taken most of the impact, jarring him but leaving him generally uninjured. "Yeah, I'm fine!" he shouted back, hearing the scrape of the luxray's claws and Kara's feet as the two followed after him. The downward slope made their movement quick, and they soon caught up to him.

With Zeke's tail now lighting up the surroundings, Max could see that there was more to the tunnel than just its odd angle. The rock here was completely smoothed out, unlike the rest of the labyrinth they had been navigating up until now. The walls and ceiling made a practically perfect arch above their heads, making the place seem almost artificial.

Though Zeke was still examining Max as if he could judge whether or was okay or not, Kara was similarly examining their surroundings.

"Don't tell me you actually picked the right mountain by being lazy," she said incredulously.

Apparently satisfied that Max really was okay, Zeke said, "Only one way to know for sure." He walked farther down the tunnel, once again lighting the way with his tail.

Kara and Max followed wordlessly, both of them tense but excited. Before they'd gone much farther, the tunnel abruptly widened before them, opening into a single, large chamber. Though they couldn't see too far into it by the diffuse light of Zeke's illumination, it seemed to be completely empty aside from one large shape at its center.

"Is that a boulder?" Max whispered, straining his eyes against the darkness as the group slowly crept forward.

At the sound of Max's voice, the shape suddenly shifted, lifted its head and looked at the group as it let out a loud yawn. "Did someone finally show up? And I was having such a nice nap…"

Emboldened, the group stepped nearer until they were close enough to get a good look at the pokémon. He was a large, very sturdy looking pokémon who matched the color of the grey stone around him. On his head were two rather sharp-looking horns, and as he stood to greet them, Max saw that he was much taller than even Zeke.

"You're Terrakion, right?" Max asked, though he already was fairly certain; though he couldn't remember human myths specifically, he recognized this pokémon nonetheless and knew it was the one.

"The one and only," he replied, his deep voice echoing in the chamber. "And you all look like regular old pokémon, but… You shouldn't have been able to get in here unless there was a human with you. Zekrom's power should've-"

"But we do have a human with us," Kara said, apparently unafraid of interrupting even a living legend like Terrakion. "Max here. Now can we have whatever we need or not? I've got a friend in trouble and we can't save her unless we get Reshiram and Zekrom to wake up and help."

Terrakion peered closer at Max. "Huh. You're right," he said, sounding only half awake. "But how did a human like you end up as a pokémon?"

Max shrugged. "I was kinda hoping you might know, because I don't, and none of the other humans know, either."

"That's odd," Terrakion said. "Reshiram and Zekrom didn't mention anything like that."

"What did they mention?" Max asked, hoping for any knew information.

Terrakion seemed to think about it for a moment, obviously in no hurry to respond. "I'll tell you," he said. "But first, let's battle. I need to wake up a bit."

"Wait, battle?" Zeke said. "But, we're-"

"Here I come!" Terrakion said as he lowered his head.

Zeke and Max immediately got out of the way, but Kara leapt into the giant pokémon's face when it charged and let loose a thunderbolt. The attack seemed to stun him for a moment, but he quickly recovered and shook off Kara like the bug-type she was.

"We're not very well matched as far as types go here!" Zeke said. "Don't you want to wait until you have better opponents to fight, Terrakion?"

Rather than respond, Terrakion lowered his head and charged again, this time towards Zeke.

Faster and more nimble than the hulking pokémon, Zeke slipped to the side right before Terrakion's horns could make contact, then dug lightning-coated fangs into Terrakion's hide. Max joined in as well, firing off a strong dragonbreath attack at the back of Terrakion's head.

These two attacks seemed to have a bit more of an effect as Terrakion let out a grunt of pain. But once again, he shook off the attack and charged, this time towards Max.

Max gave into his gut instinct and fled, running as fast as he could as he heard the thundering of Terrakion's feet behind him. In another moment, the sound of running stopped, and the echoes of his footsteps were drowned by the sound of Terrakion's heavy body hitting the floor. Max, curious now that he no longer seemed to be in danger, turned around to see Terrakion sprawled on the floor, his forelegs all caught up in the webbing of Kara's spider web attack.

"Ouch. That once actually *hurt*," Terrakion said as he slowly gathered himself up, using his horn and cutting through the webs that bound him. "Maybe I should lose some weight so that I don't fall so hard…

Anyway, based on that battle, I'm sorry to say that I can't give you all my horn."

"Your… horn?" Zeke said as the group came closer again, the battle apparently over already.

Terrakion nodded and looked over to Max. "That's what you'll need to unlock Zekrom's Dark Stone. One of my horns and one of Keldeo's. But I can tell a lot from just a short battle, and you're not ready for the responsibility. As much as we need Reshiram and Zekrom to wake up, I can't risk giving it to someone who won't hold his ground in battle. Even if I came with you, I can't guarantee its safety out there as well as I can in here, where I'm hidden and have safeguards in place. It would be best if you come back when I can trust you with it."

"No way! You can't just not give it to us now!" Kara said, infuriated. "My friend's life is on the line! She was taken by Kyurem and we've gotta get her back!"

"Sorry, but I can't help you," Terrakion said stoically, though his eyes seemed to show sorrow for her situation. "She and the whole world will be even worse off if Kyurem gets a hold of the Dark Stone."

Though he didn't have as much on the line as Kara, Max was dismayed as well. "Please, she's right - we can't really wait for it," Max said. "Everything seems to be getting worse out there, and we don't really know what Kyurem will do now that we humans saved Thundurus, Tornadus, and Landorus from its control. Shouldn't we be doing something? I was told you were just waiting for humans to show up, and now you're saying you can't even give us the key to waking up Zekrom?"

"Yes, that's pretty much it," Terrakion said. "Maybe the other human will have a better try convincing me. Why don't you get him?"

Max looked over Zeke. "But all the other humans will be miles away looking at the other islands by now, right? Unless they were quicker

at finding the other Warriors of Justice than we were."

"Wait, all the other humans?" Terrakion said. "You keep talking like there's more than just two of you."

"That's because there are," Zeke said, entering into the conversation. "Five that we know of."

"That's… not how it's supposed to be," Terrakion said slowly.

"How IS it supposed to be?" Kara insisted, obviously still angry. "Do tell, by all means, because as of yet I haven't heard anything useful except that this Kyurem thing is pretty much going to destroy the world and Reshiram and Zekrom are sleeping on the job!"

Terrakion paused for a moment, then said, "I suppose it can't hurt to say… But my fellow warriors and I don't know much, either. One day, Reshiram and Zekrom came to us. They said that somehow, their human 'heroes' were arriving in the world, and that they wouldn't be able to stay as they were. It didn't make sense to me, but they said that once their respective heroes arrived, neither of them would be whole until united with the proper human with the spirit of a hero.

"They also mentioned the weather gods, whom me and the other warriors had never met… Reshiram and Kyurem said that those three had been right all along, and that a powerful being known as Kyurem was lurking somewhere in the world, wanting to satiate its hunger. You apparently seem to know about that already. And the weather gods? You said they're all right?"

"They are now," Zeke said. "Thanks solely to Max and two other humans. Surely you can trust him with your horn based on that? He saved one of them from Kyurem's control."

Terrakion seemed to think about it for a moment, then shook his head. "I trust my own judgement. Perhaps it's because you're not the 'hero' that Zekrom is looking for that I don't feel comfortable giving it to you… Both Reshiram and Zekrom said that there would be one for

each of them. If there are more than just two humans here, perhaps you aren't one of the heroes needed to awaken them. Though I don't claim to be able to judge the spirits, nonetheless know what a hero is. Regardless of whether or not you're a hero, I simply don't trust you with the power to unlock Zekrom, especially if Kyurem is as active as you have made it sound. You know where I am now; come back with one of the other humans. Perhaps they will impress me more."

Sparks were flying off of Kara's body now. "We came all this way, traveled for several days in this maze of mountains and caves, and all for nothing? All so who-knows-what can keep on happening to my friend? She saved my entire home before she even knew any of us! I'm not just leaving her!"

"Then I suggest you go and find one of the other humans as soon as possible, or perhaps go to one of the other warriors; perhaps my judgment on this human's character isn't correct, and perhaps the other three will see that," Terrakion said. He sounded impassive still, but something about how he looked at her made Max think that he was more conflicted about his decision than he let on. "Until then, I shall be waiting here."

Though he could tell that there was more to Terrakion than his seeming lack of sympathy, even Max was starting to feel angry and frustrated that they'd come all this way for nothing. *And it's my fault… He's not giving us what we need just because I ran in battle.*

Max stepped up and, as confidently as he could, said, "Look, I ran before because I didn't think it'd matter in a silly battle like that, and I knew I wasn't strong enough to beat you, especially not head-on. If I'd known it was a test or really important, it would've been different."

"Would it really have been?" Terrakion asked.

"Yes!" Max insisted, though in his head he doubted it. *But lie or no, we've got to get him to help us! We can't go back empty-handed, especially with Emma counting on us!*

"No, I don't think it would've," Terrakion said. "And even if it had been, it doesn't matter. If you won't stand your ground in even the most frivolous of battles, I have no guarantee you'll be brave when it really matters. Now, I suggest you leave so that you can get back here all the faster, preferably with some other human in tow. My decision is final."

Zeke was just as unhappy as Kara and Max, but he didn't try to protest Terrakion's decision. "Come on, guys. Let's go. If we hurry, it shouldn't take us long to get back to the guild, and then Fum can send out a call to the other guilds' abra saying that we need another of the humans to come with us once they return, if they're not back already."

"Hmph. Fine!" Kara said, firing off a thunderbolt at Terrakion as she turned and ran out in anger; the electricity fizzled uselessly against Terrakion's earthy skin.

Zeke sighed and hurried out after her, probably to make sure that she didn't run off and get herself lost.

Max took one last look at Terrakion. Terrakion met the archen's gaze with his own steady eyes, and in a low voice said, "Regardless of who is a hero and who isn't, humans always play an important role when they appear in our world. I don't doubt that all you humans will need to help in your own ways. But whether you have the strength of spirit to do so… Well, that is something for you to find out for yourself. Is it something that you want?"

Max nodded. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't."

"Then stop relying on others. Fight your own battles. Don't just *want* strength of spirit. Take it. Do you understand?"

Max hesitated before nodding. *The question is,* can *I take it? Or will I run away when faced with the opportunity?*

Terrakion gave him an encouraging smile. "Though it can't hurt for you to come back with one of the other humans, I'd like nothing more than for you to come back having gained that strength, so that I can entrust *you* with my horn. Can you do that?"

Max sighed, shaking his head slightly. *I don't know if I can forgive myself for my past, like Zeke wants me to do. I don't know if I can move on for my own sake, like Kara suggested. I don't know if I'll ever be able to stop being a coward, like Terrakion expects me to do. But…*

"I don't know," Max said as he turned to leave. "But I'll try, just like I have ever since showing up in this world."

Uneventful chapter is uneventful. Especially compared to the last few chapters. But at least we now know Max's deep, dark secret… And at least I figured out that Max *does* have a quality to redeem him for being a complete coward. He *tries.* That counts for something, right…? Anyway, I feel like I was kinda distracted both while writing and proofreading, so… yeah. Needs more action for me to stay focused. So sorry about that.

In other news, updates will be sporadic over the next few weeks, but will hopefully stay at at least one a week. This coming week (as well as the past few days), I'm busy making a cosplay (Yellow from Pokémon Special) for a convention I'll be at down in Dallas on June 1-3… If anyone else is going, let me know! ^_^ And after that's all done, a couple weeks will be busy while I'm on a family trip.

AND IMPORTANT SUPER COOL NOTICE **:** I have recently had a book self-published through my college's printing business. I'm debating whether or not to put a link up for people to buy it. It's, um, $9 I think, not counting shipping and handling. It's a modern-world fantasy with lots of fantasy and made-up creatures, and lots of violence… Moreso than my usual amount of violence, at least. I put a poll up on my profile to gauge interest, so PLEASE go there and vote, especially if you're interested.

Chapter 19: Team Rebirth

Chapter Nineteen: Team Rebirth

"Vulpix, I really think you're overthinking this," Bulbasaur said as he trudged through the grey sands that surrounded covered every inch of the island the team now searched. "Virizion obviously went through a lot before we got there, and he was probably having nightmares based on that. You touching him was just the trigger that woke him up enough, if anything."

She sighed. "I don't know… If that was the case, he would have woken up when you were shouting at him."

"Maybe, maybe not," Bulbasaur said. "Well, we can ask him when we get back to the guild. Hopefully they'll be able to fix him up before we return. Maybe he'll know what we can do about that necklace of yours."

Vulpix paused her walking and reached up a paw, feeling the collar of ice that had only grown thicker over the last couple days. "I just hope it doesn't get any bigger. I feel like it's going to choke me… And when we went back to the guild, Charmeleon's flamethrower couldn't make it any smaller. Why's that?"

Bulbasaur shook his head. "I don't know, but worrying about it isn't going to help. If anyone will know what to do, it's the Four Warriors of Justice. If we can find Cobalion before whatever got to Virizion gets to him, he'll tell us what to do. So we've gotta keep searching. At least you're not going crazy like when Streya was around, so that's something to be thankful for."

They crested a dune and paused as they glanced around at their surroundings. In every direction, all they could see were the same grey dunes. Dotted among them were the occasional warped spires and arches of metal, standing like sentinels in the barren landscape.

"Do you think that's Cobalion?" Bulbasaur asked, pointing at a moving speck somewhere in the distance.

Vulpix watched it for a bit, then shook her head. "Looks like just another team searching. I can see at least two pokémon there."

Bulbasaur shrugged. "Well, it was worth a shot."

"This place is kind of… creepy," Vulpix said, shivering as the harsh north wind blew sand in her face. "What do you think shaped all that metal?"

"All this sand is metallic, right? That's what it smells like, at least," Bulbasaur said as he looked up at a nearby one, a column that was nearly perfectly straight until halfway up, where it began to twist into an ill-formed coil of metal. "Maybe some fire type came along and got overly carried away. It also looks like something Cobalion probably could've done."

"Wrong on both guesses!" a voice shouted from somewhere right around where Bulbasaur was looking, startling both him and Vulpix. There was a flutter of movement from within the spiraled part of the metal as a pidgey hopped into view. "It's completely natural. The land makes these by itself." The pidgey flew down from her perch, landing in the sand next to the two teammates.

Bulbasaur looked at her for a moment. "Aren't you that pidgey who showed up with the galvantula right when the Solstice Games were ending? The one that's actually human?"

"That's me!" she chirped. "Alexa's the name. And you're a human, too, right?" she said as she looked to Vulpix. "Sorry, but I didn't catch your name."

"I don't exactly have one," Vulpix said quietly. "I don't remember anything from being human. At all."

"Ouch. That's rough," Alexa said. "Kinda envy you, though. I only remember my last day, and it wasn't exactly a pleasant one… But that's why I'm here! I'm still looking for my friend, 'cuz I figure he must've ended up in this world if I did. His name's Cecil. You seen him?"

"Nope, sorry," Bulbasaur said. "Never met a pokémon by that name."

Alexa gave a little shrug. "That's all right, I figure he'll be showing up here sooner or later. He's not one who would sit back if he could figure out anything about what all's going on. Bet he wants a little 'chat' with whoever he thinks is in charge here. So I bet he'll show up here at Cobalion's island, or at least one of the Warriors of Justice or whatever you call 'em… Stupid name, right? But wait, I haven't seen you two around these past few days, and I thought I had a pretty good grasp of what all pokémon were here searching for Cobalion. You two just get here?"

"Yeah, we were at Rooted Archipelago first," Bulbasaur answered. "We managed to find Virizion, but he'd already been beaten up pretty badly by someone."

She ruffled her feathers, as if annoyed. "Really? Maybe I went to the wrong warrior first…"

"What, you think this Cecil person was the one who did it?" Bulbasaur asked. "Was your friend that vicious of a human? Virizion was cut up really badly."

"No, no, he wasn't like that when I knew him!" Alexa said. "He's really a nice guy! Kinda quiet, but nice at heart, at least. But… You know, a lot has happened. Who's to say hom much he remembers? He could have a completely different personality… I really hope not, but it could be. But he *was* really smart about fighting when he was a human, so I figure that'd probably only get better now that he's a pokémon. It's only a theory, but it's my best lead. So anyway, did you hear anything about the other warriors? They been found yet?"

"Nope, not by the time we were at the guild," Bulbasaur said. "Then again, we found Virizion nearly as fast as could be possible. A fearow from our guild got us to the islands quickly, and we found Virizion the same day we arrived. No doubt most pokémon took longer to even get to the island, not to mention find their warrior. They might even be back by now, but we won't know it way out here."

"Nothin' for it, I suppose. We'll just have to keep on searching on our own," Alexa said. "If you found Virizion so quickly, maybe you'll have as good of luck here. Anyway, this south end of the island has already been checked pretty thoroughly by other teams. Probably better luck if we head up north, where everyone else is."

"We?" Bulbasaur asked. When Alexa nodded, he continued, "But won't we hold you back?"

She lifted off from the ground and began to circle just above their heads. "Me 'n all the other flying types have already looked all around here. Wherever he's hiding, he can't be seen from the air, and I bet you guys have a better chance of finding him than anyone else. And since I need to talk to him if Cecil's stopped by, I might as well stay and chat with you. Now, this way!"

She began flying forward, though her pace was slowed thanks to the strong headwind; she had to tack back and forth at angles to her true direction just to stay aloft.

Bulbasaur and Vulpix glanced at each other, then followed Alexa without any argument.

"So, um, Alexa?" Vulpix tentatively asked as they got on their way. "You said all these metal… things are natural?"

"Yup!" she shouted down to them so as to be heard over the wind. "Saw it myself. Seems like this island is actually volcanic? Or something like that. I saw a couple places where it was erupting, like geysers of sand and magma. Really freakin' cool, if you ask me. But

it's so cold up here that it hardens quickly, and with this stupid wind, it gets bent into some pretty fantastic shapes. Nice places to rest my wings."

Seeing that they were falling a bit behind Alexa, both Bulbasaur and Vulpix picked up the pace. "All right, so what about that day you remember as a human?" Bulbasaur ventured. "What happened?"

"That's for me to know and you to probably not find out," Alexa said. "A girl's gotta be allowed to have some secrets, don't you think? All you need to know is that I was with Cecil, which is why I think he ended up here if I did. And what about you, Vulpix? You sure you don't remember *anything?* I've talked to a number of the other humans, and they all remember something. Like, do you know what world you're from? Because apparently, some of us come from different worlds… Like, did you remember your world having pokémon alongside humans?"

Vulpix shook her head. "When I woke up, everything was strange… I didn't know what pokémon were, but I didn't know what humans were, either. I still don't even know what a human looks like, even though I was one. It's a weird feeling."

Alexa looked down at her. "How do you even know you're a human, then? What if you're just a normal amnesiac vulpix?"

"I don't know…" Vulpix said. "But being a vulpix felt wrong when I woke up. And when Bulbasaur mentioned humans later, it just clicked that that was what I was."

"So no idea or anything about what you were like?" the pidgey asked. "That's rough."

Vulpix's still mangled tails drooped sadly, their tips dragging in the sand behind her. "Tell me about it."

"Why don't we just stay focused on what we're doing," Bulbasaur said encouragingly, knowing how touchy that topic was for his

partner. "Cobalion's obviously well hidden somehow, so we should all keep our eyes open for anything strange. Who knows where he'll be?"

Come to me.

Vulpix plodded slowly forward through a sea of sand, alone as mist swirled around her, almost like a living thing. Her mind felt clouded. She didn't remember how she'd gotten here, or how long she'd been walking, or why she was following this voice. All she knew was that she had to keep going.

Give yourself to me, and I will make you strong. I will help you remember who you are. You will be able to find your way out of this mist of uncertainty. You will be able to find your reason for being here.

That sounded nice, yet dread filled her. Something was wrong. Where was she going? Why did this voice want her to come?

Come to me. Give yourself to me. Time runs short. You should already be mine.

Suddenly, she panicked. The mist seemed to be coalescing, pressing in on her and freezing around the ice on her neck. It weighed so much. She fell, screaming as her breath grew short. She scratched and clawed at her neck, but the ice became heavier, and it spread further up her neck and down her body. She struggled and struggled, but it kept on coming, and-

"VULPIX!"

Vulpix was jerked into wakefulness, panting as her bleary eyes adjusted to the night around her. Both Bulbasaur and Alexa were standing in front of her, Bulbasaur just as out of breath as she herself was.

Her fear left her slightly, only to be replaced by confusion. "Um… I'm sorry. Did I wake you two?"

"That, and you scared me half to death!" Bulbasaur said, looking at her with relief on his face. "We hear a scream and wake up and you're not anywhere in sight!"

"We followed the shouting and found you way over here, clawing at that necklace thing of yours," Alexa said. "Nightmares or something?"

Vulpix reached up a paw to the ice at her neck, and her heart skipped a beat. Though it was still nothing more than a collar, it felt thicker and more solid than ever. And something about that terrified her more than usual. Her mind still felt clouded, this time just from the terror of the night. Her breathing grew more rapid and she instinctively started to claw at the ice, so hard that she caught up some of her own fur and skin in the process.

"Vulpix, Vulpix, calm down!" Bulbasaur said as he ran up right in front of her, grabbing the active paw with a vine and holding it steady. "You're awake now! Everything's fine, I'm here for you!"

Vulpix fought his grip for a second or two longer, then suddenly calmed. "I'm… I'm fine. Sorry. Again."

Bulbasaur slowly let go of her paw, though he kept the vine at the ready in case she panicked again. "Nightmares?"

Vulpix nodded.

"What about?"

"I… I don't remember," Vulpix said. *What was it? Why am I so scared? The collar scares me, but why was I trying so hard to get it off?*

"Nothing at all?" Bulbasaur asked. "Nothing about the collar, or walking all the way our here?"

She shook her head. "Do you think… Do you think it matters?"

Bulbasaur let out a breath. "I don't know. Probably not, but… Well, I'll feel better once we find Cobalion and see if he can help you out. So let's get back to sleep for now, and we'll keep on looking in the morning. Okay?"

Vulpix took a deep breath. "Yeah, all right. Just… Sleep. Okay."

"So, um, I know this might be a touchy subject after last night and all," Alexa said the next day as the trio continued their search, "but what's up with your necklace thingamajig?"

"Quite honestly, I don't know," Vulpix said, for once hardly worried by the topic. *It's still troubling, but it's just so nice that it's daylight again. Everything seems so much worse at night.* "I woke up with it on, and it's been growing the past few days or so."

"Last time it happened was thanks to a no-good ice-type," Bulbasaur added. "We're not entirely sure what's up with it now. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, do you?"

Alexa glided in a little lower. "Can't say that I've heard of anything like it, either as a human or a pokémon. None of the rest of us humans woke up with anything, I don't think. You're just full of mysteries, aren't you Vulpix?"

Vulpix giggled a bit. "I suppose so." *I don't know why, but there's something about Alexa that I really like… I think maybe it's how carefree she acts.*

"So is there still nothing in sight, Alexa?" Bulbasaur asked.

She flapped her way up again so that she could see over the tops of the dunes, then shouted down, "Nothing! A couple of teams in the distance, but that's it!"

Bulbasaur sighed and spat out some sand that had blown into his mouth. "Figures. Guess we'll just have to-"

"Wait!" Alexa suddenly shouted down. "You guys hear something?"

Bulbasaur scowled and listened for a moment. "I've got nothing. You, Vulpix?"

Vulpix shook her head.

"No, there's definitely something making a noise up ahead!" Alexa said. "Come on!"

The pidgey picked up the pace, flapping frantically against the headwind that hindered her progress. Bulbasaur and Vulpix both sped up as well, running as best they could through the unstable sand.

When they reached the top of the next dune, Vulpix pricked her ears forward and finally heard the noise. It was a sound like the clanging of metal on metal, mixed with the occasional shout of some pokémon saying something; but though it sounded close, it was also muffled, like a giant blanket had been put over whatever was going on.

"Over here, you guys! There's an entrance!" Alexa had landed on the ground near the base of the dune, where yet another of the twisted metal formations stood. This particular one was an arch small enough to be almost completely hidden by the dune that towered over it.

Except… It's not an arch. As the two half ran, half slid down the side of their dune, the details of the metal became more and more pronounced. It was an entrance, made entirely of metal that led deep

into the dune itself. Yet despite how cut off the inside was from the outside, the cavern's depths didn't appear all that much dimmer than where Vulpix and Bulbasaur were; just like at their own guild, tendrils of light dotted the ceiling, presumably filled with electricity.

And as they got closer, the sounds from the inside grew more defined. It was a battle, no doubt about it, and there was little doubt in anyone's mind that one of the participants had to be Cobalion.

"But who else is fighting?" Bulbasaur asked, listening closely as they finally reached the entrance. "Do you think it's the guy who hurt Virizion?"

"If so, we need to get in and help," Vulpix replied as she stepped into the tunnel. "Let's go."

"I'll sit this one out, guys!" Alexa said. "I'm not too comfortable in places where I can't fly well… Like tunnels. But I can, um, go fly and get those other teams I saw earlier!"

"Right, you do that!" Bulbasaur said.

"Just don't let either of those guys get away until I get a chance to talk to 'em!" Alexa said as she took off again.

Vulpix and Bulbasaur wasted no more time; they hurried deep into the bowels of the cave, both ready for anything as they came closer and closer to the sound of battle.

Suddenly, the cave opened up before them, revealing a broad, high-ceilinged chamber that must have been only marginally smaller than the dune that hid it from the world. Inside, two pokémon were fighting, both apparently heavily damaged. One was unfamiliar to both of them, except from descriptions they'd received: a large, intimidating four-legged pokémon with blue fur and two uneven horns that were reminiscent of the twisted metal spires of Twisted Dunes.

That's got to be Cobalion, Vulpix thought. *And that scyther… There's no doubt. That's Edge, the guy who attacked us at Tallgrass Plains! That pokémon who's been going around fighting and even sometimes killing others! So this means he must've been the one who defeated Virizion!*

As Vulpix and Bulbasaur entered the room, Cobalion turned his head to see who it was, his glare pained and unfriendly. That distraction was all that Edge had needed to get the upper hand, apparently; in another moment, a slice of one of his scythes slashed clean through the base of one of Cobalion's horns.

Cobalion roared and lunged at his attacker, but the faster, smaller pokémon managed to leap away with incredible speed, the detatched horn clutched between his two blades.

"This is all I need, right?" he asked, his voice quiet despite the echoes of Cobalion's roars that reverberated through the air. "That's what Virizion said. A horn from you and a horn from him, then go to the Western Guild. That's all I need to awaken Reshiram, right?"

Cobalion let out another bellow of rage. "Human or not, you're someone so dishonorable as to attack someone while he is sleeping… I cannot allow you to be the one to awaken Reshiram! You cannot be the hero he seeks!" His one remaining horn suddenly began to refract the light that shone from above, growing in intensity rapidly before releasing the flash cannon attack in one massive blast. This time, Edge had no chance to dodge, yet he kept ahold of the horn nonetheless as he was sent careening back into the wall behind him.

He had taken massive damage, that much Vulpix was sure of; yet he still quickly got to his feet and glared at Cobalion with condescension. "At least Virizion took his shortcomings with dignity. If you were given the task of guarding your own horn, you should at least not sleep through my approach. You blame me for your own failure."

Cobalion charged forward, but Edge had apparently been expecting this. Using his speed to his advantage just as he had when fighting Team Rebirth at their first meeting, he dodged out of the way at the last second and opened his wings, flying towards the door where Vulpix and Bulbasaur still stood in wonder of the battle.

"We'll stop him, Cobalion!" Bulbasaur shouted, reaching up his vines and making them into a tangled web that covered the only escape. Vulpix, too, did her best, firing off a flamethrower at the approaching pokémon. Though exhausted, Edge still had enough control of himself to dodge somewhat; but still, the fire caught him in several places, nearly sending him careening off course.

But the desperation of his situation lent him strength. At the last moment, just as he seemed sure to be caught in Bulbasaur's impromptu web, he grabbed the horn with his mouth, freeing up his scythes to slash clean through the net and allow him through. He tumbled to the ground just on the other side of Bulbasaur as the grass-type cried out with pain, momentarily stunned as he withdrew what was left of his badly severed vines.

We've got to stop him! Her worry about Bulbasaur was pushed to the side as she turned to dash past him, after the retreating figure. But before she could take even a step, she heard the rumble of steps behind her. She turned again to face Cobalion, only to be tossed aside as he rammed into her with an iron head attack.

"Hey, we're trying to help, you jerk!" Bulbasaur shouted as he braced himself for battle, Edge momentarily forgotten. "I thought you were a Warrior of *Justice* !"

Cobalion didn't so much as look at Bulbasaur; he kept his hate-laden gaze trained on Vulpix as she rose to her feet, shaken by the force of the attack. "As distasteful as it is to let that scyther get away, I cannot possibly let someone like you possibly seize the horn from him!" he shouted. "Did you think I didn't feel the cold of your presence the moment you entered the room? You are a minion of the Cold One that Reshiram and Zekrom spoke of! You serve Kyurem!"

"No I don't!" Vulpix shouted out. *Maybe that was the case in the past… I just don't know. But I'm not anymore!* "I just want to help you, and help the-"

"Do you think I'll fall for your lies!" Cobalion interrupted. "Now fight me so that I can end you!"

"Then you're fighting us both, because I'm her teammate!" Bulbasaur said as he rushed over to her side.

Vulpix looked over to him, one thought still nagging at the back of her mind. *Scyther's getting farther and farther away as we sit here shouting at each other… But our mission is to help awaken Reshiram. We can't let someone like Edge be the one to awaken him, just like Cobalion said!* "Bulbasaur… Let me fight Cobalion," Vulpix said, determined. "He's a steel type, right? And already badly injured. I can take him. You go after Edge."

"But Vulpix, that's insane! You can't!" Bulbasaur argued.

"It'll be fine. But we can't fail our mission, can we?" Vulpix said, what she hoped was a confident smile on her face. "I wouldn't want to face Deputy Zebstrika if he knew we let a wanted criminal escape from right under our noses, would you?"

"Forget Zebstrika, I wouldn't want to face myself if I left you here and you died," Bulbasaur said. "Best plan is just to beat Cobalion before Edge can get too far."

I don't want you getting hurt on my account, but… "All right, then let's go!"

Though Cobalion had been nice enough to wait throughout the brief argument - probably unwilling to attack any pokémon unprepared - Vulpix had no qualms about firing off a fire blast as soon as her discussion with Bulbasaur was finished. Cobalion, caught off gurad, took the blast in full, but shook it off as he charged forward at the two of them.

Bulbasaur fired off a razorleaf at the incoming figure as Vulpix took evasive action, running in a different direction. Cobalion followed her course blindly, ignoring the leaves that bounced practically harmlessly off his fur.

Though more agile, Vulpix couldn't outrun something as big as Cobalion for long. In a few seconds, he was close enough behind her to take a swing at her with his remaining horn, its tip piercing into her and slicing across her back.

She let out a gasp of pain and managed to leap to the side before he could take another swing; carried on by his own momentum, he charged ahead a ways before managing to bring himself to a stop.

At least he's already exhausted… Otherwise, I think his aim with that horn of his would have been a bit more accurate. That could have been my neck.

"Vulpix! You okay?" Bulbasaur said as he rushed over. More quietly, he added, "He's targeting you. Get out of here, and I'll hold him off. If the legends of him are true, he won't kill any pokémon unjustly, and I think that'd include me."

Vulpix shook her head and, before Cobalion was finished turning around to come in for another attack, she shot off another fire blast. This time, though, she didn't have quite the advantage of surprise; he had enough time to move so that the incoming fireball only grazed his side. He didn't so much as flinch; instead, he lowered his head and glared unblinkingly at Vulpix as a sort of energy gathered around his remaining horn.

"That's focus blast!" Bulbasaur said as he shot off another round of his razorleaf. Vulpix didn't know much about that attack, but Bulbasaur seemed to know what he was doing; even his relatively ineffective leaves were enough to break Cobalion's concentration, and the energy collapsed in on itself.

Vulpix took a deep breath and started another flamethrower, maintaining it for as long as possible as Cobalion tried to recover. He tried to remove himself from the stream, but Vulpix moved it with him.

Yet it was strongest at its outset, and Cobalion knew this; as the flames began to weaken, he charged straight into them.

"Vulpix, don't move until I say so. Keep it up!" Bulbasaur said.

Vulpix didn't respond; she was putting every ounce of her breath into the flamethrower. Though it was weakening, she could see that Cobalion was quickly wearing down as well. The more she blasted him, the sooner his downfall.

Cobalion got closer and closer, and her fire got weaker and weaker, and still Bulbasaur didn't say anything.

We need to move, both of us, or we'll have a very uncomfortable meeting with Cobalion's headbutt! Vulpix thought. *Or I will, at the very least! He can't see through the flames, so he's just making sure to go straight into them, which will lead him straight to-*

"Now!"

Vulpix cut off her flamethrower and sidestepped frantically, just as Bulbasaur attempted a maneuver she'd only seen him successful at in practice. In a feat of maneuverability that any bulbasaur would seemingly be incapable of, he pivoted on one of his rear legs so that he was completely turned around, then jumped up with his forefeet so that he stood only on his rear legs, his bulb facing where his head had just previously been looking. Keeping with the fluid motion, he promptly released a cloud of greenish dust right at the spot Vulpix had been and where Cobalion's head was now, hitting him square in the face.

He tossed his head right as it happened, managing to hit Bulbasaur away and into a wall, then slowed himself and stood up straight,

apparently unharmed with only a greenish powder on his face to show for Bulbasaur's plan.

Cobalion turned and locked eyes with Vulpix once again, seemingly more determined than ever now that Bulbasaur was out of the way. "I will not allow you to live, demon!"

He charged again, but before he could get very close, he stumbled and fell to the ground.

That could be him finally feeling his injuries, or…

He stayed on the ground as he rose his head again. His eyes were crossed and his eyelids drooping, and he had trouble even focusing on Vulpix without his head dropping an inch or two every few second.

"Sleep powder," Bulbasaur said as he got to his feet, dazed and sore from the earlier impact but not too badly harmed. "A concentrated amount, straight in your face. Practically as good as knocking you out." He grinned in spite of the situation. "Never thought I'd manage to do it without getting killed myself."

Vulpix saw rage spike within Cobalion even as the sleep powder continued to take effect. In what seemed like a colossal effort, he managed to rise on his front hooves and he opened his eyes fully, just to glare at Vulpix. "Neither I nor the other Warriors of Justice will tolerate your existence in this world! You'd do best to kill me now, or I swear in the name of Reshiram and Zekrom that I will kill you, servant of Kyurem!"

Vulpix felt her hackles rise; something about his challenge and oath only riled her up. She couldn't quite put her paw on it, but a mix of anger and defensiveness rose within her so strongly that she couldn't help herself. Before Cobalion could pass out completely into sleep, she fired another fire blast, knocking him out completely.

"Vulpix, why'd you do that?" Bulbasaur said as he ran over to her. "Are you insane?"

She turned away from Cobalion's prone figure and looked at the ground. Now that the battle was over, now that the mission was practically failed, all her doubts came back to her. Everything that had motivated the final fire blast came directly to the fore of her mind.

"I'm… I don't want to die. Especially not by his horn. Just thought I'd point that out," Vulpix said, ashamed that she'd let her fear and anger get the better of her. "And no matter what he says, I'm *not* a-"

"-servant of Kyurem?"

Both Bulbasaur and Vulpix jerked up their heads to turn to this new voice, one that they both recognized. In the doorway were a couple of different guild teams, one of which was Team ShadowSpark from the Western Guild. At their head was Raichu, a pokémon both Bulbasaur and Vulpix had talked to on occasion.

"You deny it, of course," Raichu said, an angry expression on his face. "But I was around the guild before Cobalion and the other Warriors disappeared. He doesn't lie, and he's never wrong. Not about stuff like this. Did you think you'd just take advantage of how accepting Guildmaster Emolga is of everyone, no matter how suspicious they are?"

"Raichu, what are you talking about!" Bulbasaur said. "I've never met a nicer pokémon than Vulpix. Do you really think that she'd be doing anything for Kyurem?"

"I wouldn't know, but Cobalion would," Raichu said, sparks flying from his cheeks. "If he says that she's a servant of Kyurem, then she-"

Vulpix stood and met Raichu's eyes. "I'm not a servant of Kyurem." Then, returning more to her timid self, she looked back at the ground

and said quietly, "I don't know how I'm connected to him, but I'll fight him to the death if I have to."

Raichu slapped his tail against the ground, and his team partners, Absol and Magneton, moved up and prepared for battle. "If it's to the death you want, I'm sure we can oblige."

"All right, I've sat back here long enough." Alexa suddenly fluttered up from behind the other, less vocal teams. "I'm not even a guild pokémon and even *I* know you're being barbaric. Let your guildmaster or someone who actually has some *authority* deal with her, if you think she's such a threat. Sheesh. And for the record, I think she's a nice enough girl."

Raichu acted like he was about to attack her, but she had already turned away from him and flown over to Vulpix and Bulbasaur. "Anyway, I already said that I don't like being underground, so I'll make this quick. Who was Cobalion fighting? Did he say if his name was Cecil or anything? I was *counting* on you to keep him here."

"Well, as you can see, we ran into a bit of trouble!" Bulbasaur said, rather grumpy thanks to Raichu's accusations. "But it was a scyther named Edge, the guy who's been causing trouble across the region for a while now. Cobalion seemed to think he was a human, but-"

"Which way'd he go?" Alexa pressed before Bulbasaur could finish.

"How should I know? We've been stuck fighting horns-for-brains down here," Bulbasaur said. "But why does it even matter? Your friend was named Cecil, right?"

Alexa was already turned to fly off, but she indulged him a quick explanation despite her haste. "No human parents would ever name their kid Edge - I'm willing to bet anything that's not his real name! It's gotta be Cecil! Anyway, I'll be off!"

"Wait!" Vulpix said. "He's heading for the Western Guild, I think he said. It sounds like that's where he has to awaken Reshiram, if that's

what he's aiming to do."

"Right, thanks! Best of luck with your idiot guildmates over here!" she said as she flew right over Raichu's head, raking a furrow in his scalp with her claws as she soared past.

As Raichu expressed his outrage at the retreating bird pokémon, Bulbasaur turned his attention back to Vulpix. The bold, almost cocky pokémon who'd wanted to fight Cobalion alone was gone now; in her place was a vulpix with mangy tails and a badly cut back, nervously touching a paw to her icy collar.

"Vulpix, it'll be all right. I know that you're not a servant of Kyurem, and you know-"

"But I don't," she said, in little more than a whisper. "I'm sorry. I've been trying to be optimistic about everything, but the thing is, I don't know. What if I was Kyurem's servant? And what if this collar means I still am? What if-"

"But you're not," Bulbasaur said. "You only serve someone if you choose to. And you're choosing not to. Just calm down, and I promise we'll get through this, together. Even if there are jerks like Raichu to get in our way."

Vulpix tried to relax, but found that she was shaking - from the cold that accompanied the blood loss from her back, the adrenaline that was still coursing through her, or fear, she couldn't say. "All right. But… I'm still worried."

Bulbasaur nuzzled up against her side, as comforting a gesture as he could manage; she briefly laid her own head against his bulb, soothed somewhat by his proximity.

"I'll share a secret with you," Bulbasaur said. "In truth… I'm worried, too. But that just means we've gotta stay vigilant and be ready for anything, right?"

Vulpix smiled. "Right."

Unedited chapter is unedited. Sorry, but I really need to pack and get to bed so I can get up really early tomorrow morning and head off to A-Kon in Dallas! Super excited! Anyway, I'd appreciate any review corrections or PM corrections you can give; other than that, I'll get back to this chapter and edit it in a few days after the convention is over, just to clean up any weird sentences and such that I normally would've caught in my proofreading. Hopefully it's mostly okay overall, anyway. Hope you liked it!

Chapter 20: Team Misfits

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As Isola and what remained of Team Misfits rode on Lapras's back along the coast of Barren Seaside, every stray wave and unruly gust of wind caused her to jerk her head up towards the noise, her heart racing with unnecessary fear. She knew in her head that acting like that was stupid, that she'd been getting along fine *not* acting like that these past few weeks, that the dark and ocean that surrounded her right now was no excuse for her sudden paranoia.

But she couldn't help it. Everything had felt so right, and now everything had gone so, so wrong.

"Cody…"

"Please, Doduo, you need to calm down," Lapras said, his voice soothing even as he pressed his body to its limits to get Team Misfits and the badly injured Keldeo back to the Eastern Guild. "Tell me, what exactly happened on the island? Who did this to Keldeo, and what happened to Cody?"

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said desperately, though in her heart she knew the truth. She just didn't want to say it aloud. To Isola, saying it aloud would be the last thing to make this horrible nightmare true.

"It was Emma," Ryan spoke up as he suddenly stirred, though he didn't attempt to move from where he lay between the spikes on Lapras's back. "One of the other humans… The same thing that happened to the weather trio happened to her, I think. She must be working for Kyurem now."

Lapras looked back at him, his face serious. "Tell me more of this, but later, when you have your strength. But this… Doduo, did she

take Cody?"

Unable to deny the truth any longer, Isola nodded.

Ryan's paws clenched as he sat up, holding onto a spike for support. "I can't… In the name of Zekrom and Reshiram above, I just can't believe this happened!"

"He's going to end up like Emma… isn't he." Isola said it as a statement, not a question.

As if seeing Isola's mood for the first time, Ryan forced a smile to his face, trying to act less down for her sake. "Now come on, Isola. I know he's an idiot, but have some faith in him. He won't let some jerk like Kyurem overpower him."

Isola let out a short squawk as a large wave crashed into Lapras's side; only once that shock had passed did she calm herself long enough to say, "Emma seemed like a great pokémon. Strong in battle, strong in spirit. But we've seen what happened to her, haven't we?"

"Isola, we've gotta stay optimistic," Ryan said, a kind smile on his face. "We'll find him and help him. He's part of the team, after all. Lisa will wake up, and then the three of us will beat up anyone who gets in our way. Sound good?"

"No!" Isola said. "It doesn't, because you know that's not how it'll happen, Ryan!" Stunned by her shouting, all Ryan could do was listen as she continued, "Has anyone in *any* of the guilds even thought about what's happening? Ice is taking over the land, this Kyurem wants to consume everyone and everything, but all anyone can think about is how great it'll be when we get Reshiram and Zekrom back and we all feel like heroes because we did it! Did anyone even think about what the weather gods said, about how strong Kyurem is? Did they even pay attention to the fact that he was strong enough to subdue the very *spirits* of Thundurus, Landorus, and Tornadus? All three of them *at the same time* ? Now Kyurem

has Emma, he's got Cody, and he's got Keldeo's horn which does who knows what to wake up Zekrom! What chance do we really have?"

"Shouting will *not* help, Isola," Lapras said, his voice firm. "You must get a hold of yourself. So long as your friend lives, there is hope. I am getting you three back to your guild as fast as I can, and then-"

"It still won't help!" Isola said, practically in tears. "He'll still end up just like Emma, and then what will we do? He'll kill us as soon as look at us! We'll-"

"In the name of Zekrom and Reshiram, won't you all please just quit with the STUPID YELLING!" Lisa, though still lying on her back with her eyes closed, sounded just as awake as ever now that she was angry. She continued, "I get the snot beat out of me by some legend who acts like a little kid, and then you have to go shoutin' for all the world to hear while I'm trying to rest afterwards. Have a heart, Isola."

Isola looked down and then back to Lisa several times, as if trying to overcome the difference between her usual accommodating self and her outrage over Cody's loss. Eventually, the outrage won out, albeit in a much quieter way. "But Cody, he-"

"You said that he's been caught by that jerk of a deerling Emma, right?" she interrupted, her voice annoyed. "And she was a human like Cody before, but now she's evil, so Cody'll become just like whatever she is now, right? Something like that is happening, based on all your yelling, Zekrom only knows how much you've been shouting about it. Well, it's simple then, right?"

Isola was speechless now, completely lost; Cody was the one to voice their confusion. "What are you talking about, Lisa? What's simple?"

"What we gotta do to get him back!" she said, suddenly sitting up and glaring at the two of them. "Sheesh, and I thought *I* was the idiot in the group. So Emma went after Cody, right? Or was it the horn we

got from Keldeo? Well, whatever, she went after one of them, which means she'll be going after either more humans or the other Warriors of Justice. We just gotta go to whatever she's chasing and wait for Cody and her to show up so we can beat some sense into them."

Now both Ryan and Isola were speechless as the sense of Lisa's plan dawned on them; distraught as the both of them had been up until now, neither of them had thought of this possibility.

A smug but faint grin came to Lisa's face. "Now, in the name of all that is good, just let me sleep until morning. I'm exhausted." She collapsed onto her back again and immediately fell asleep.

Isola and Ryan looked to each other. "She's… right?" Isola said.

Ryan smiled. "For once in her life, she's actually had a good plan. But wait - *did* you see Keldeo's horn anywhere? I assumed you'd have picked it up if you did, but…"

More excited now, Isola responded, "No, I didn't see it anywhere, and I was looking. I was thinking maybe Cody would drop it along the way to lead us in the right direction if he was battling, but… It was nowhere. So do you think Emma was after both of them?"

"I don't know, but she certainly took both of them anyway," Ryan said. "But it works out just as well, since the other humans will be on their ways to the other Warriors of Justice. We just have to find them before Cody and Emma do, then lie in wait for those two to show up."

"Do you think we have to get horns from all of them in order to get to Reshiram and Zekrom?" Isola said. "Or will Kyurem be able to wake them up with just Keldeo's horn and Emma and Cody?

Ryan shrugged. "I'd suppose we'll need all four, but it's hard to say since Keldeo didn't tell us much. Anyway, we should get to Mountain Warrens as soon as we can - that's where Terrakion is supposed to

be, and that's the way that Max went. And it's the closest. Lapras, can you take us there?"

"I can and I will, but only after I've gotten you three back to your guild," Lapras said. "Your kangaskhan friend needs treatment of some sort before she fights again, and you two aren't in the best of shape yourselves."

Isola glanced down at her legs, which were still shaking and weak from being frozen solid earlier. "But we have to get there before they do, and who knows how fast they can travel!"

"I suspect that this sawsbuck you've been speaking of will have to take the horn and your friend elsewhere before going to find the next Warrior, whichever one it might be," Lapras said. "And I can move faster than most pokémon, at least on water; however empowered she is, I guarantee you I can swim faster than any sawsbuck can run. We have enough time for you to get at least partially treated. Now, I insist that you rest until then."

"But if we go there immediately-"

"-we'll run into Emma and still lose," Ryan said, putting a paw consolingly against Isola's side. "I know you miss him, but we're all exhausted. We have to take the night to get healed up and rest. Then we'll leave first thing tomorrow morning. That is, if you'll be up for it, Lapras."

Lapras nodded. "In a situation like this, I think I'll manage. Now you all get some sleep."

Isola sighed and slowly lowered her head so that she could rest. "I suppose you're right… But please, do hurry."

Completely exhausted, Isola dozed off soon afterward. However, even in her sleep she jumped at every noise and shifted uneasily at every sudden movement by Lapras.

The confidence she had gained over the past weeks was now gone.

"This doesn't look good," Lapras said as he neared Mountain Warrens, swimming alongside a trail of ice that was quickly breaking apart in the warm seawater.

"She's already here," Isola said. "Someone is already here. Maybe Emma. And maybe Cody, too."

"So what are we waiting around here for?" Lisa said as she rudely jumped up onto Lapras's head; with the cut on her back now bound tightly by spinarak thread and partly healed thanks to an audino's heal pulse, she seemed mostly back to normal. "Let's hurry up and get the two of 'em!"

Lapras appeared annoyed at Lisa's boldness, but he nonetheless picked up his pace. "What about what they said back at the guild, about Virizion? Do you think someone else under Kyurem's control was the one who reached Virizion before that other human and her partner?"

"I don't know," Ryan said, "But the important thing is that there's no way that could've been Emma and Cody. They're the only two we're focusing on."

Lapras came to an abrupt halt just then as he slid up against the beach. "I'll stay here. You guys get going."

Isola was already off of Lapras's back, with Ryan and Lisa already riding atop her. "Thanks for the ride!" she shouted back as she ran forward, following the trail of ice that continued onto land and into the nearest cave.

"We'll be back before you know it!" Isola added.

Lapras shouted something back to them, but the words were already lost in the rush of wind as Isola raced forward as fast as she could,

catching her passengers off guard.

"Woah, slow down now!" Ryan said as he lit up his fur with a dim flash attack, just soon enough to shed some light as they entered the first cave. "You won't be able to keep up this pace for too long, and then we'll be worse off than if you'd just slowed down in the first place."

She let up slightly, but otherwise didn't answer as she kept her eyes trained on the trail of ice that glinted in the darkness, digging her sharp talons in as she ran in order to keep from sliding.

"You know, it still just annoys me that I was knocked out before Emma came last time!" Lisa said as they delved deeper into the first mountain. "I'll show her a thing or two this time! And that Cody, too! How dare he get himself captured!"

"He was trying to lead Emma away from us, I think," Isola said quietly.

"All the more reason for me to be angry!" Lisa said. "I sure didn't ask to be saved by a numbskull like him. The nerve! I am going to have a strong, fist-emphasized talk with him when we get him back, make no mistake about it!"

Lisa's usual attitude did nothing to lift Isola's spirits as she continued on.

Ryan noticed this. "Hey, Isola, lighten up. We're going to find him, so you don't have to worry. And then we'll *all* get him back, together."

"But what if he's not here?" Isola asked, voicing her worries. "What if it's just Emma, or some other pokémon entirely?"

"Then we keep ourselves together and keep on looking until we find him. That's that," Ryan said. "Cody wouldn't want you to be freaking out like this about him, don't you think?"

"I dunno about that," Lisa said as they emerged into daylight momentarily, already through the first mountain. Everyone blinked for a few moments as their eyes adjusted, and then Isola was off again, following the trail of ice down that mountainside and up another. Lisa continued, "You know, he's such a whiny brat that he probably wants us to be paralyzed with grief without him. You know, just so he feels like he's wanted. Maybe he set this whole thing up and is watching us from a distance just to see how lost we are without him."

"Ha ha, very funny," Ryan said. "But really, he wouldn't want us to be miserable about it."

"Yeah, he'd just want us to hurry up and save his sorry butt," Lisa agreed. "Just like we usually do."

They lapsed into silence for a bit; it was only sometime later, after a noise or crumbling rock somewhere had startled Isola for what must have been the hundredth time, when Ryan spoke up again, his voice more serious than before. "You know, you can't break down again just because he's gone. You can't go back to the way you used to be," he said. "I know you've grown really attached to him, but… Have you considered what will happen when he finds a way to go back home? To turn back into a human? You've heard how he talks about his home, and his family. He'll want to go back to what he knows. Even if we save him now, you need to learn how to live for yourself, to be comfortable just living - not jumping at every little noise. I tell you this as a friend. I don't like seeing you like this, especially not after you got so much better about it."

She didn't answer at first, but eventually, she said, "It's not that simple."

"No, I *thought* it wasn't that simple. I thought you'd be permanently jumpy. But obviously, that's not the case," Ryan said. "You know what it's like now to not be afraid of your own shadow. Are you really going to let that happiness ride on Cody alone, and disappear now that he's gone?"

"… but he's the one who helped me find it. Whether he meant to or not," Isola said.

Ryan's fur bristled a bit. "I'm just as upset about all this as you. We all are! But you can't base your happiness on just one pokémon, Isola. It's stupid, and you deserve to think of yourself more highly than that."

Isola didn't answer for a moment. "I know," she said eventually. "But right now… Right now, I just want to focus on Cody."

Ryan relented. "Me too. But just promise me you won't let yourself go to pieces? Especially if we don't find him right now."

"Yeah, promise it!" Lisa piped up. "Can't have a permanent scaredy-meowth on my team, now, can I?"

"I'll try," she said, but just at that moment she heard a voice from somewhere up ahead in the tunnel and lost her footing in her surprise, even though whoever it was sounded well ahead of them.

Ryan sighed, but he didn't have the heart to chide her further for something that she had very little control over. "Let's go and see what that was," he said, his ears pricked forward. As Isola continued on, another voice echoed up the tunnel.

This time, Ryan heard the voice clearly. "I recognize that voice! It's Max!"

Isola sped up, and in no time at all she and the rest of her team found themselves in front of Max and the two pokémon accompanying him, a luxray whom none of them recognized and a galvantula who they remembered from Emma's home valley.

"Oh, hey guys," Max said happily, brightening at the sight of them. However, in a moment, he caught the desperation of Team Misfits' faces. "What's wrong? Something to do with this ice? We were trying

to find a shortcut back from Terrakion and we stumbled across it… Where's Cody?"

"You found Terrakion?" Isola asked. "And you just left him?"

The luxray stepped up. "It's a long story, but-"

"No time, then, we've gotta follow this path! All of us!" Ryan said, and Isola accordingly started running down the tunnel again; the others, getting the message, followed. As they continued and Isola devoted her breath to running, Ryan explained, "We found Keldeo and he gave us his horn, which apparently we need to awaken Zekrom somehow. But Emma came and-"

"Emma! You found her?" Galvantula asked, sparks flying off her fur in excitement.

Ryan nodded. "Yes, but it wasn't really her. I'm sorry to break this to you, but she was being controlled, like Tornadus and Thundurus and Landorus were until not too long ago. She was like a sawsbuck, but different - all icy, and way too abnormally strong. The point is, she took both Keldeo's horn and Cody! And we think that either she or maybe Cody is here now, trying to steal Terrakion's horn and maybe come after you, Max!"

"Me?" Max squawked, surprised and obviously scared for a moment; however, he quickly changed his attitude. "We've gotta try and stop them, then, and get Emma and Cody back!"

"But Terrakion said he'd be safe where he is, right?" Luxray said. "He said only humans could…"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Exactly. So, you guys got the guts to help?"

"If there's a chance to help Emma, then I'm in!" Galvantula said.

"And I'll help as best I can, too!" Luxray said. "But Max, if Kyurem is really collecting humans, then if you get caught-"

"No, I'm coming, too," Max said after a moment's hesitation as he ran alongside his two temporary teammates, following Isola. "After you followed Kara out, I promised Terrakion I'd try to be less of a coward. I don't want to let him down if I can help it."

Luxray scowled. "Even so, humans are… special, you know? You in particular can make pokémon evolve, and apparently two of the humans here in this world are needed to wake up Reshiram and Zekrom. You're too important to lose."

Max shook his head. "But I want to go. I can't just keep on running from stuff, can I? It's like what we were talking about earlier, on our way to see Terrakion."

Galvantula looked a little bit skeptical. "But are you doing this for the right reasons?" she gasped out as, out of breath, she jumped onto Luxray's back to hitch a ride. "Is this for Terrakion, or for your sis-"

"It's for myself," he said, determinedly. "I want to help, really. Any way I can."

The galvantula seemed satisfied, though how much of that satisfaction was based on Max's answer and how much was based on the fact that she now had a ride was up for debate. "Glad to hear it."

Luxray scowled for a moment longer, but then a grin came over his face. "Same here, bud."

"Hmph. Maybe you're not the absolute coward I thought you were, Max," Lisa said. "Not like it matters. I'll take care of anyone by myself, trust me. "

"So what is it that happened between you guys and Terrakion?" Ryan asked as they continued onward, following the ice trail ever farther. "Did he tell you anything more? Keldeo tried to explain things, but we were too rushed."

Kara, now the only one who wasn't out of breath from Max's little group, answered for them. "Terrakion fought us, though Max wasn't ready for the responsibility of his horn or whatever. He said that we need his horn and Keldeo's in order to get the Dark Stone or something, and we need that to get to Zekrom. Oh, and get this - there were only supposed to be two humans, one each for Reshiram and Zekrom. Terrakion didn't know why there were more than there should be. But anyway, he made it sound like Reshiram and Zekrom fell asleep *because* the humans came."

Before anyone could say anything more, the ground shook with such force that they were all knocked off of their feet. The walls around them made ominous cracking noises, but try though they might, they couldn't get up and escape to safety without once again getting thrown to the ground.

The shaking quickly died down, and the tunnel stayed intact; however, as they looked to each other, their worry only grew.

"That's gotta be Terrakion," Luxray said as he got to his feet. "He's the only one strong enough to do something like that. Let's get going!"

They all quickly heeded his suggestion and hurried onward. As they continued through the mountain, the earthquakes continued periodically, each progressively less intense.

When they emerged into the light once again, it took Max only a second to get their bearings. "Over there!" he said, pointing in the direction that the ice path continued beneath the mountainside trees. "That small mountain over there is where Terrakion lives!"

Max had barely finished speaking before Isola was racing down the slope, following alongside the icy trail.

"Yes! Time for some real battle!" Lisa exclaimed as they hurried, practically flying down the mountainside; Luxray, Max, and

Galvantula followed behind, not quite so fast for fear of falling down the steep slope.

In no time at all, Isola was in the mouth of the tunnel, and in another moment her feet slid from beneath her. The steep slope, combined with the ice that coated the ground, was too much for her to keep on her feet. But she didn't mind; all it did was get her to Terrakion - and, possibly, to Cody - all the faster. Surprised shouts from above alerted them to Max and the others slipping down just behind them, but Isola ignored them as she sped onward, her two passengers now off of her back, slipping alongside her.

They reached the end of the slide and tumbled into a chaotic darkness, filled with the sounds of charging footsteps and attacks flying back and forth. It wasn't until Galvantula and Luxray fell in afterward, both with their fur alight, that the battle was revealed.

Terrakion was clearly flagging, with parts of his body encrusted with ice and other parts bleeding where his thick hide had been broken. Dancing around him was Emma, doing her best to avoid the powerful swings of Terrakion's horns, and she was by no means uninjured. One of her forelegs was almost completely unusable, skin and muscle sliced nearly to the bone; and other less serious but still noticeable injuries dotted her body, causing blood to stain the frosty fur. But still, she fought on with ferocity unparalleled, hitting Terrakion with an energy ball that sent him to his knees.

Lisa, Ryan, Luxray, Galvantula, and Max all charged forward, intercepting and attacking Emma before she could advance upon the fallen Terrakion. But Isola hung back for a moment, simply staring at the scene.

"Cody's… not here," she said to herself, watching as the rest of the impromptu team attacked at once. Lisa landed a powerful fire punch, doing heavy damage. Ryan got knocked away with a stomp attack before he could do anything, but the others quickly jumped in - a thunderfang from Luxio ripped at one of her hind legs, and a wing attack from Max battered her head.

"Stop it, what are you guys doing?" Galvantula shouted, hanging back for a moment. "You can't hurt her that much! We just need to incapacitate-"

Before Galvantula could finish, Emma had violently tossed aside Max, one of her sharp, ice-horns stabbing straight through a wing; she kicked out with a leg, knocking Luxray away.

"Don't hold back!" Lisa said as she landed another fire punch before getting knocked away herself. As she got back to her feet, she said, "We've gotta knock her out completely, and she's not going down easy!"

"Cody's not here," Isola whispered again, still immobilized as she watched the battle.

Terrakion let out a rumbling roar as he got to his feet and charged forward once again, tackling Emma while she was distracted by Lisa's most recent attack. "I'll bring this whole cave down around me before I let you awaken Zekrom!"

"No need - we'll take care of her!" Max said, for once determined to continue the battle despite the obvious toughness of the adversary; whether due to some change in mindset, or to the fact that Emma was already injured and badly outnumbered, it was hard to say. Despite the profuse bleeding that came from his wing, he charged in with his body covered in the glow of an ancientpower attack. But Emma was already back on her feet, and she shot off an ice beam as he charged, knocking him back and freezing much of his body.

Though it didn't knock Max out completely, the power and the doubly strong type advantage took a major toll. Max didn't even have the energy to struggle against the ice as Emma quickly approached, apparently intent on knocking him out and capturing him just as she had with Cody.

"Max!" The others quickly intercepted, Luxray at their head as he let loose a powerful thunderbolt, which Ryan and Galvantula quickly

augmented with their own electric attacks, amplifying the affect. The tables had turned completely. Now Emma was the one at the disadvantage. Another attack or two would be enough to finish her off.

Apparently, she realized this as well. She backed up against a wall, her cold, blank eyes scanning her opponents as everyone closed in on her in a semicircle - everyone, that is, except for Isola, who remained at the entrance.

Terrakion stepped out from the ranks of the rest of the group, apparently planning on landing the final blow. But before he could do anything, Emma's body began to glow, surrounded with what appeared to be a white, almost fire-like energy; in another moment, the dragon pulse attack radiated out from her body. Though she herself was heavily damaged, her attack power was undiminished. The wave of draconic energy surged into each of her attackers, sending them backwards and stunning them, even if only for a moment.

But a moment was all she needed. She glanced to Max, but apparently thought better of making any attempt at taking him. Instead, she reared up and brought her one good foreleg down, the icy hoof slamming into one of Terrakion's horns and snapping it cleanly off. Terrakion roared with pain and struck out blindly, but Emma already had the horn in her mouth and was leaping away, ice forming at the ground where her hooves touched as she ran towards the exit, straight towards Isola.

Isola saw the sawsbuck coming and, for the first time since the team's arrival in Terrakion's chamber, she awoke from her stupor. She glared at Emma as she approached and widened her stance, holding her beak at the ready. Emma lowered her pointed horns to knock Isola aside, but Isola was too nimble; in single fluid motion, she wove her head and neck between her horns and corkscrewed her beak right into the sawsbuck's mouth in a powerful drill peck that went cleanly through the bottom jaw and partway into the roof of her mouth.

Even for the monster that Emma had become, this was too much to bear. Her jaw now practically useless, Emma dropped the horn just as Isola withdrew her beak and jumped back, preparing to attack again. The others in the cave were just getting to their feet, though all except the glowing Galvantula were little more than silhouettes to her in the strange, pokémon-lit chamber.

"You already took Cody from me," Isola said, her voice low and serious as she faced down with Emma. "I'm not letting you take Zekrom from the whole region, as well."

Blood dripping thickly from her mouth, Emma looked at Isola for a moment, and at the horn that Isola had clenched beneath a talon. But then the sounds of the others came from behind her, and she - or, perhaps, the thing controlling her - apparently saw that the cause was lost. She made as if to attack Isola, then dodged to the side at the last minute and dashed up the tunnel.

"You're not escaping!" Oblivious to her teammates and the others still left in the cavern, she abandoned the piece of horn and ran up the tunnel after Emma, following the sound of her hooves as she dug her talons in and clawed her way upward.

By the time she emerged into the light, Emma had already gained some distance as she followed her own ice trail back across the mountainside. But Isola didn't dare stop, though she doubted that she would catch up. Instead, she ran onwards, following Emma as she leapt up the mountainside.

Isola continued even into the tunnels, despite their twists and turns and the complete dark that she had to navigate in; she guided herself only by the sound of the hoofbeats ahead of her. Though Emma had no light as well, she seemed in no way hindered by the darkness. Isola stumbled and tripped in the darkness, yet she didn't dare slow her pace. She always got right back to her feet and hurried onward, ignoring the pain as her feet were rubbed raw by the rough rock she couldn't see.

By some miracle of desperation, she managed to keep up through the first mountain they went through, and even through the second. But by the third, she had run into too many walls, and slipped one too many times. She stopped at the exit of that tunnel and watched, breathless, as Emma scaled the last bit of the next mountain and disappeared into the next tunnel.

Maybe Lapras would stop her. Isola allowed herself that hope for just a moment. But that hope quickly died; even if Lapras tried, Isola didn't doubt that Emma still had enough fight in her to battle again and win, at least if it was one-on-one.

"Why did I want to catch her so badly…?" Isola asked herself as her trembling legs abruptly gave way beneath her. "Zekrom… At least Zekrom will be safe. For now."

She doubled her neck in on itself and rested her head atop her body, as if ready to sleep. "But she's the one who took Cody. That's why I wanted to catch her. And she's a human, too… I guess, mad at her though I am, I want to help her."

Isola was exhausted; she'd been running practically all day. She'd barely blinked before she found herself drifting off into sleep, still perched at the exit of the mountain tunnel.

She awoke only some time later, when she heard rushed steps echoing up from the dark behind her. She didn't startle at the sound. In fact, she knew she'd never startle unnecessarily again, at least not like she used to. Cody's kidnapping had hit her hard in many ways, and she wasn't over it yet by any means. But she had faced down the one who had captured him; though she couldn't put it into words, that had changed something essential about the situation. Now she was different; now she could look at the world without being afraid of every shadow.

But Cody was still gone. That part hadn't changed. She lifted her head slowly, sadly, to watch Ryan and Lisa as they came up out of the tunnel. Looks of relief crossed their faces when they saw her

sitting there; perhaps even Ryan realized that Isola had changed for good, that she was permanently her calmer, less jumpy self. He had always been the most perceptive of the team. He'd been the one who'd convinced Isola to join him and Lisa originally, even though she'd been terrified of everything and been totally opposed to joining a guild because of that.

But none of that mattered. Lisa and Ryan being there for her as she looked back at the place where Emma had disappeared - it helped, but it wasn't the same. Even when they said that Terrakion had decided to give the broken horn to Max, when they told her that Terrakion would be rejoining the world to help correct all that was wrong with it… Even then, things weren't okay.

Cody was still gone.

Very nearly didn't get this out in time to meet my one-a-week minimum, but anyway, here it is! Hope you liked it! Getting another one out in a week will be iffy as well, so it might be a bit late past that desired minimum. I apologize in advance if that happens.

But anyway, a chapter without it's proper main character… Kind different to write, since I was trying to get into Isola's head without actually doing direct thought and similar stuff. Anyway, as you can tell, she's currently making a strong effort at stealing some of Team Rebirth's angsty mojo… Oh, me and all my angsty writings. :P Though personally, it's arguable that angst is what moves any story along, so… yeah. Point is, I like it, so it tends to hang out in all of my stories. ^_^

Thanks for reading!

P.S. - Story has reached official halfway point!

Chapter 21: Max

Chapter Twenty-One: Max

"Hey all, we're back, and we found Terrakion!" Max shouted as he rode atop Zeke's back into the main gathering space of the Southern Guild, Terrakion's horn held high with his good wing. His bad wing, the one that had been stabbed clean through by Emma's antlers, had made their return home rather slow. After all, the amateur splint that Kara had constructed out of webbing could only do so much to limit the pain and any worsening of the injury.

Not to mention, none of them had gotten through the battle completely unharmed. Terrakion in particular had needed to take his time on the return trip after his exhausting solo battle with Emma. Another day or two had needed to be sacrificed in order for Lapras to drop off Team Misfits at their own guild, and more time still had been spent by Lapras in order to find a water-type large enough to carry Terrakion to shore.

But none of that matters now - not the injuries, not the time, Max thought triumphantly as pokémon gathered around him, Kara, Zeke, and Terrakion. *We did what we came to do, and I didn't run away from a battle, for once in my life!*

"Welcome back!" Guildmaster Mandibuzz said as she flew over the crowd, landing on the branch-woven floor just in front of the newcomers. "I'm so glad to see you all mostly okay, especially after all we've heard from the other guilds!"

Some other pokémon called out to Max and Zeke with similar enthusiasm, happy to see them back. However, Max noticed that not all the pokémon seemed exactly cheerful about his return. Though he was on good terms with nearly everyone in the guild - or so he thought - he noticed that some pokémon were glaring at him, as if enraged or offended by his mere presence.

Though confused and hurt by even this minor offense, Max returned his attention to the matter at hand, where Mandibuzz was turning to speak to Terrakion. "And welcome to our guild, Terrakion! I'm afraid I've never had the pleasure of meeting you, even before you and the other Warriors secluded yourselves away. I'm Truvel, and I'm co-guildmaster at this guild. I think you might've met my mate, Gale the Braviary, when he was deputy here."

Terrakion smiled. "Yes, I remember him quite well. And I thank you for the warm welcome. However, there are more important things to be done at the moment, first and foremost being to get that horn-" using the growing stump where the horn had previously been attached, he gestured to the horn that Max carried, "-to someplace as safe as possible, and guard it. Until we have Keldeo's horn, I'm afraid we won't be able to do anything with it… But it must be kept out of Kyurem's hands for that same reason. That's why I'm here - Max may have earned that horn, but I'm not about to let it out of my sight regardless."

"Yes, yes, of course. And trust me, you can count on us of the Southern Guild to keep it safe," Mandibuzz said as she held out a wing to Max. Max dropped the horn onto it, and she cupped it in her feathers before quickly folding her wing against her side. "And I'm sure I have much to talk to you about, Terrakion. But first, all of you look exhausted. And Max, your poor wing! What happened to it?" Before he could answer, she continued, "I want you all down in the infirmary, now! Rose will take care of each and every one of you. Come now, I'll lead the way."

Though being a bird that was not exactly made for walking, Mandibuzz managed well enough as she led the four of them back down the way they came, walking down the spiral staircase in one of the four tree trunks that made up the guild. She spoke with Terrakion as they went, already attempting to familiarize herself with all the details of the situation that she had yet to hear.

Max, however, didn't pay any attention to them. His wing was hurting badly again, and he was still preoccupied with how meanly many of

the pokémon in the gathering space above had been looking at him and Zeke.

No, not me and Zeke. Just me, he corrected, thinking back. *But surely I'm just imagining things? We just successfully brought back Terrakion. And I don't think I've done anything to make them angry… Vibrava's always been pretty nice to me, and yet she looked positively enraged or something. And Rhyhorn, too… And it wasn't just them. Has something changed since I've been gone? We were searching for Terrakion for a week at most, and then everything after that was another few days. What could be different in such short a time?*

He was still lost in his thoughts when Rose the Audino got them all seated in their own respective beds of leaves in the infirmary, then began tending to Terrakion, the most injured of them all, first.

Zeke noticed that Max had lost his earlier bravado, and in a low voice so that Mandibuzz, Rose, and Terrakion wouldn't be bothered, said, "Hey, Max, somethin' up? Wing hurting?"

"Yeah, but that's not what's worrying me," Max said. "Did any of the other pokémon up there seem… I dunno, upset at us?"

Zeke frowned as he thought back to a few minutes before. "No, not that I can remember."

"Hey, I noticed it," Kara commented. "Some of them seemed madder than a stampeding tauros. You do something to make 'em angry?"

"I don't know, that's the thing!" Max said desperately. "Last I remember, they were all nice enough to me. Vibrava was even nice enough to take the time to try to teach me dragonbreath, but even she seemed angry just then."

"Vibrava? She doesn't get angry easily, you know that," Zeke said. "She's a dragon with a heart of gold most of the time. You sure you're not just imagining things?"

"He certainly is not," Audino said as she came over to Max, apparently finished with her preliminary examination of Terrakion's injuries.

Zeke looked at her, surprised by her assertion. "Are you sure you heard what we were talking about? I mean, Vibrava of all pokémon-"

"These ears of mine hear quite a lot, and that includes the murmurs of the guild members over the past few days," Auidno interrupted as she stripped away the spider silk wrap on Max's wings. "I swear, some pokémon around here don't have one bit of sense - I'm glad I get a chance to talk to you before they do, at the very least. You see, a good number of them are suspicious of you, Max. They don't trust you anymore."

Max scowled, the unfairness of this sudden revelation bearing down on him. "They don't trust me? But why?"

"Not through any fault of yours! From everything I've heard of you up until now, not a single one of them have any quarrel with you, and *that's* something to be proud of in a guild filled with so many idiots," Audino said as she touched one of her ear's feelers to Max's wound; the pain immediately started to abate. "It's just because you're a human, which is what's so stupid about it!"

"Because he's a human?" Zeke asked. "But they were all fine with it before!"

"Not just fine with it. They practically *worshipped* him, the dolts!" Audino said, obviously annoyed beyond belief. "I can't *tell* you how many pokémon came up to me that following week after the revelation telling me how cool it was to have a human as part of the guild, even if he wasn't actually a human anymore. But *now* they hear a couple bad things about the other humans when the other humans themselves were victims, and they suddenly think you're a spy for Kyurem or some nonsense like that!"

Kara snorted with apparent amusement. "Max? A spy? I can't think of a single pokémon less suited to the job."

"What is it that's happened to the other humans that's made everyone think that?" Zeke said, his hackles rising. "Surely not because of Emma? She can't help what's happened to her!"

Kara's laughter immediately disappeared. "Yeah, and I'll pummel anyone who says otherwise! She stood up for the whole valley - she's not a bad pokémon!"

"I know, I know - don't get angry at me!" Audino said. "I completely agree! But it's not just that deerling human. I mean, she's a lot of it, since she's working for Kyurem now and she did such a number on Keldeo. From what I hear, Keldeo had even more of a beating than Terrakion over there. But there's also the fact that everyone suspects that the same will happen to Cody now as well, since news of his kidnapping reached us. And *then* there's what's going on with that Vulpix over at the Western Guild. She was the one who found both Virizion and Cobalion, but they'd both been defeated, apparently by *another* human who seems really violent - in fact, if the rumors are true, it's that same scyther that gave you that long nick out of your beak, Max."

"Edge? The guy who's even killed some pokémon? That guy's a human?" Zeke said. "But he's nothing like all the other humans here! Unless… Do you think he's controlled by Kyurem, too?"

Audino shook her head as she let go of Max's wing, which was feeling much better despite the still ugly wound. As she moved to check over the abrasions on Zeke's body caused by Emma's hooves, she said, "The rumors are fuzzier on that point. All I know is that he snuck up on both Virizion and Cobalion and did a lot of damage. Rumor is that now that he's beaten both of them, he'll be able to awaken Reshiram, and who knows what'll happen if someone like him awakens Reshiram? Maybe nothing, but… We're all a bit in the dark about what exactly will happen next, since Virizion is just barely getting out of critical condition, and everyone

up on the island of Twisted Dunes - including Cobalion - has yet to even get back to the Western Guild. All we know is what a few flying types who were there at Twisted Dunes managed to report.

"But that's not even the worst of it. Apparently, Cobalion tried to *kill* Vulpix. He called her a servant of Kyurem outright, and even let that scyther go in order to try to finish her off," Audino said in a hushed voice. "And when Cobalion or any of the Four Warriors of Justice feels the need to kill someone, pokémon tend to take that sentiment seriously."

"You know, when you put it this way, the humans don't have the best track record," Kara said dryly. "Cody and Emma captured, one a murderer, another one on Cobalion's hit list."

Audino and Zeke both glared at her.

"What? I'm just sayin'."

Audino let out a sigh. "Well, anyway, then we're back to you, Max," she said. "With everyone else at fault in some way or another, pokémon are starting to suspect you. Especially because there's the fact that you can evolve other pokémon, and we heard that the human-deerling from Sheltered Vale is a sawsbuck now that she's working for Kyurem. If Kyurem can evolve pokémon, and you can evolve pokémon…" she trailed off, the end conclusion being apparent.

"This is absolutely ridiculous!" Zeke said, kneading his claws furiously against the ground.

"Oh, do calm down, I'm trying to heal you!" she said as she worked on a cut on one of his legs. "And it's not like *everyone* is that idiotic, and at the very least I don't think any of them are stupid enough to outright attack you out of mere suspicion. Especially not with the guildmasters more than likely to severely punish *anyone* attacking their guild members, even if it's another guild member." She cast a furtive look over at Mandibuzz. "Guildmaster Braviary has been

helping out with the search for the Four Warriors, so he doesn't know about all this suspicion. But I've spoken with Guildmaster Mandibuzz, so she is at least aware of the situation. So long as pokémon keep it to glares and the occasional harsh word, she doesn't feel justified in interfering, especially since that won't necessarily do much to change pokémon's opinions. But if things do get unbearable, let her know. I'm sure she'll do something to help."

Max nodded. "Well, that's reassuring," he said, though the faint smile he had didn't make him seem very reassured. "I'm sure it'll be fine. They'll all come to their senses eventually, right?" *They can't stay angry at me forever when I've done nothing wrong.*

… *Right?*

"I hope so," Audino said as she finished up with tending to Zeke and turned to Kara. "Just keep your spirits up, and remember that there are plenty of other pokémon looking out for you."

"I just can't take this anymore…" Max said forlornly as he sat between the roots of one of the Guild's massive trees, looking northwards across the large meadow area that surrounded the guild. "I'm barely back for a day and it's already too much. It's just not fair."

He picked at the spinarak silk bandages that now covered the injury on his wing. He half wished that the injury was worse; in the infirmary, at least he'd been insulated from the rest of the guild, since Audino had refused to let anyone in unless they too were injured. But since he'd been let out that morning, he'd felt exposed to the icy glares and half-heard insults.

It's not even a lot of pokémon that are like that, hating me as soon as they look at me… But even just a few is enough, I guess. And I'd been looking forward to seeing everyone after being at Mountain Warrens so long… Now I just don't want to be around anyone.

He saw a pair of pokémon approaching the guild in the distance, but the grasses of the meadow obscured most of them. He withdrew a little bit farther into the roots, not wanting to be seen by whoever it was.

I was feeling so good about finally being brave, even once. But with all this… No, I don't really think I was brave back at Mountain Warrens. I had Zeke there, and Kara, and Team Misfits, and even Terrakion wasn't entirely beaten. If it hadn't been clear that we had the advantage, I don't think I would've tried. And after I was frozen, when Emma looked like she was going to grab me as well as Terrakion's horn… I can't deny that I would've run then, if I hadn't been frozen. I wanted nothing more than to get out of there, regardless of whether Emma got Terrakion's horn or not.

"I haven't changed a bit," he murmured to himself. "I'd still abandon everyone and everything else just to save my own skin. I'll never make up for what I did to my sister… I mean, at this rate, I won't even be able to make up for all the times I've tried to run away here in this world."

"This way - I think I heard him over here."

Max recognized the voice that came from somewhere around the trunk he had his back to, and he poked his head out; regardless of how much he really did not want to talk to Vibrava and whoever she was with, he didn't want to appear like he was hiding, cowering in some corner like a scared rattata.

Though if I'm gonna be honest with myself, that's exactly what I'm doing.

"Hey, Max! We want a word with you!" Vibrava said as she caught sight of Max and flew over a root and towards him; a group of five other guild pokémon followed her.

Max was not in the mood for talking to anyone, let alone these guys who were undoubtedly here to hassle him. He just wanted to sulk by

himself, or at best get cheered up by some of the pokémon who actually believed in him. *I'd even prefer talking to Kara at her grumpiest than mess with these pokémon right now.*

The idea of them coming to be angry at him for something that wasn't true suddenly bugged him so much that he didn't so much as let Vibrava get the first word. As soon as she and the rest of her group arrived, he said, "Listen, you can call me a coward. I'll admit to that, and always have. But I'm *not* in league with Kyurem! Don't you remember how the weather legends nearly caught me? *Twice?* And didn't you hear how Emma tried to get me back when we were fighting with Terrakion? Why would that happen if I was working for Kyurem?"

Max was almost surprised at himself for the sudden outburst; he usually tried to stop conflicts rather than exacerbate them. But all the pressure of everything that had happened since the Solstice Games was just too much. So long as he had others to rely on, to back him up, he could usually hold himself together. Now, he'd lost a lot of that support.

"Who knows?" Vibrava said in answer to his question. "Maybe Kyurem wants you here for some reason, and wants the guild to trust you," she accused, her voice low and serious. "Listen, I just wanted to say that I didn't think you were a bad guy before, and-"

"And I'm still not a bad buy!" Max insisted. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the two pokémon who he'd spotted in the distance coming closer. One or two of the pokémon in Vibrava's group were also keeping an eye on the oncoming pokémon.

Knowing my luck, it's more pokémon who don't like me anymore. Still, Max had no choice but to ignore them as he continued addressing the pokémon in front of him."Won't you all just listen to me? I don't know why I ended up in this world or how, but I've got nothing to do with Kyurem!"

Another member of the group, a furret, laughed harshly. "That's exactly what you'd say if you *were* working for Kyurem, too. You expect us to believe you? To believe *any* of you humans?"

Before Max could respond, Vibrava continued in a level, mostly calm voice, "My point is, I don't trust you. None of us do. Not anymore. Everything else points against you being good, and so far, you humans have brought nothing but trouble. Maybe we're wrong, in which case we'll apologize as soon as we have proof enough that you're innocent. But if our instincts are right, then we can't risk letting our guards down around you like the rest of the guild has. This guild is our home, and if you do *anything* to harm it or a single pokémon in it… Let's just say we won't forgive you."

"Are you guys just here to bully him, or do you have something to actually say?"

Everyone turned to see the two pokémon who had finally made it over. Max recognized them but, much to his surprise, they weren't from the Southern Guild.

"Houndour? Growlithe?" Max said incredulously as they came to his side, too confused by their arrival to know what else to say. *What's Team FireFang doing here?*

Vibrava's eye's narrowed. "You two are from the Northern Guild, aren't you? Well, this is Southern Guild business. Do you even know what this human might be up to?"

Houndour let out a puff of flame, a challenging glint in her eyes. "I know Max was teamed up with us at the Solstice Games, and I know that the Max we met then isn't someone who'd willingly betray anyone. And that's all I need to know."

"Yeah, that's right!" Growlithe barked defensively. "Max is a friend, and we're not gonna just sit by and watch you all bully him!"

"I mean, really, let's think about this for a second," Houndour continued, "If we only knew him for a few days and yet know we can trust him, yet his own guild members don't trust him… Makes me think this Southern Guild is one screwed up place. Not even giving your fellow guild members the benefit of the doubt, huh? That's just not right."

"What are you even doing here?" Furret said. "I mean, not like you or any other Northern Guild pokémon aren't welcome, but this is way south for you all. You aren't just here for a pleasure visit, are you?" His voice was accusatory, and not at all as conversational as the words themselves were.

Both Houndour and Growlithe puffed up a bit. "If you *must* know," Houndour said, her pride obvious, "Guildmaster Abomasnow himself asked us to come out here. Though things are tough in the North and we've already been sparing as many members as possible to help with the search for the Warriors, now the Guildmaster sent out a few extra teams to help out. We've been getting news off and on from Fum, whenever she can work up the energy to teleport from your guild to our guild for a bit. Speaking of which… We heard about the other three warriors, but has Terrakion been found yet?

Furret reluctantly nodded. "He's here, along with that horn of his that we'll need to get Zekrom to wake up."

"Well, we're here to help protect 'em - both him and his horn!" Growlithe said enthusiastically. "And we'll protect our buddy Max, too, if he needs it!"

"So why don't you all let us catch up with our friend?" Houndour suggested. "Go on, three's already a crowd."

None of them looked too pleased to have their chat with Max cut short, but Vibrava - being, perhaps, the least emotionally antagonistic towards Max - made the best of it. "We'll let Guildmaster Mandibuzz know that you're here, Growlithe and Houndour." With that, the group made their retreat back into the guild.

After Vibrava and the others were out of hearing range, Max turned to Team FireFang. "Thanks for sticking up for me back there," he said, much relieved now that the conflict was over. "It's been kinda tough since I got back… A lot of the pokémon here are treating me like that. Really, Growlithe, Houndour - thanks."

Houndour grinned. "Just call me Kuro. Sounds like you need all the real friends you can get right now."

"And call me Aiden!" the growlithe said. "Friends gotta stick together, right? So don't even mention it."

Max felt like he was practically glowing, he was so happy. After so much antagonism directed towards him and only him in such a short time frame, having the surprise support of these two was wonderful. They were really friendly pokémon all around, and exactly the kind of supportive friends he wanted right now. Not like Kara, who was a jerk most of the time, and not like Zeke, who would just get overly aggressive about pokémon with Vibrava's perspective.

"So you guys came all the way here from the Northern Guild?" Max said, moving the conversation away from the more distasteful topic of his fellow guildmembers. "Must've been quite a walk."

"It was, but we can keep up a pretty good pace," Kuro said. "Got here in a couple days. Guildmaster Abomasnow sent us out as soon as he got word about Keldeo."

"Glad to hear there's something we'll actually be able to help with, by the way!" Aiden added. "I mean, we knew that Keldeo was at the Eastern Guild, and we heard about Virizion and Cobalion being sent to the Western Guild for treatment, so at least the other teams that got sent out would have *someone* to guard, just in case the Warriors were still targets. We weren't sure if anyone would even be here."

Max smiled. "I'm glad there's something for you to do, too! I'd be helping out with guarding the horn as well, but I don't think pokémon here would be too happy about that."

"You know, speaking of that…" Kuro said. "You sure you want to stick around here? These pokémon around here don't seem all that friendly towards you. I'm sure Abomasnow would welcome you up north if you wanted a spot at our guild, just to get away from these jerks for a while."

"Besides, don't you think something's a bit off here?" Aiden said, suddenly seeming antsy.

Max scowled. "What do you mean? Some pokémon are being mean, but… I mean, it's my guild. And they mean well, everyone does. They just want to protect the guild. Is… Does something *seem* off to you?"

Kuro looked around nervously and then, in a low voice, said, "We're not really supposed to tell you, but… Abomasnow suspects that there might be pokémon that are working for Kyurem lying low in the guilds until their chance to strike arrives."

Max's eyes widened. "Surely not? I mean, I know everyone here, and-"

"Well, that's what he thinks," Kuro said. "And the real reason he sent teams to the other guilds is to try and sniff 'em out, if we can. He said he's already found a couple of pokémon in our guild, and he doesn't think we're the only guild with infiltrators. But he doesn't want to risk the trust of the other guildmasters by saying that their members might be spies."

"But wouldn't it be obvious if someone was under Kyurem's control?" Max said. "I mean, I saw the weather gods when they were controlled, and I saw Emma when she was controlled… They were all like zombies, and never said a word."

"That's only if Kyurem takes control of them," Aiden said, also keeping his voice low. "The Guildmaster says that the pokémon he discovered were working for Kyurem willingly. There's apparently a

whole underground movement, mainly involving pokémon from the north, where we live."

"So really, you should come with us to the Northern Guild!" Kuro insisted now. "We might have more of those low-lifes up there, but Guildmaster Abomasnow is at least looking out for them. He wanted us to let you know you'd be welcome there."

"And we'd love to have you there with us!" Aiden added, wagging his tail.

Max instinctively looked around, just to triple-check that no one was around; this was serious stuff, and if they were right, then it'd be best if no guild pokémon heard. Convinced that they really were alone, he responded, "I appreciate the offer, but I feel plenty safe here. And besides, all my friends are here."

Both Kuro and Aiden looked conflicted. "If you're sure…" Kuro said. "But we're still worried about you here. I mean, everyone in the land knows how to find you since you stay at the guild. Even if it's not someone within the guild, someone outside of the guild could easily find you."

"I'll be fine!" Max reassured them. Afraid though he was of the thought of being captured, he honestly did think of the guild as the safest place in the world. *After all, even Vibrava and those who think like her would still jump in to help if someone really attacked me, I think.* "I trust the pokémon here at this guild, even if not all of them trust me."

Kuro still seemed concerned, but she dropped the matter. "Well, even if that's the case… Okay, here's the thing. Thanks to that Vibrava, Guildmaster Mandibuzz is probably expecting us by now, and we'll probably be busy getting settled in here all day. But later this evening, would you be willing to help us? I mean, you know the pokémon here better than we ever will. Maybe if we talk about them a bit, it'll help us two figure out if there really are or aren't any followers of Kyurem here?"

"Sure, I guess that's fine," Max said, glad to be able to help, especially if there was any way to convince them that Guildmaster Abomasnow must be mistaken. "Where and when?"

"At Desert Plateau, just north of here?" Kuro suggested. "After sunset? Far enough and late enough that we won't be stumbled upon. I'm just worried about the wrong pokémon finding out that we're onto them."

"Sounds good," Max said. Desert Plateau was maybe a half hour's walk away; not too far by any means. *Not to mention, it'll be nice to just hang out with Kuro and Aiden and get away from the guild for a while.*

"Forgot what a climb that was!" Max puffed out as he crested the steep slope of the plateau, finally pulling himself up to rest on its broad, flat top.

Kuro chuckled a little bit. "It is a bit steep, I guess. And not much that's exciting at the top to make the climb worth it."

Though it was true that there was nothing but some scrubby bushes as far as the eye could see atop the plateau, Max immediately detected something out of place in Kuro's tone. Still out of breath, he looked up at them through the murkiness of twilight to see that neither of them seemed quite like their usual selves. Aiden was refusing to meet Max's gaze, and Kuro was quite the opposite - even while talking about the landscape, her intense eyes wouldn't leave Max.

"… Is something wrong, you guys?" he asked, suddenly suspicious. He felt guilty about being suspicious, but it was true that he didn't know Aiden and Kuro that well. And yet… *No, I trust them. I couldn't see them meaning anything but good for any pokémon. But something is still wrong. If something's up… Well, I told Zeke where I was going, and that I'd be with Team FireFang. Hopefully he'll come if something really does happen.*

Neither of them answered Max's question for a moment. Then, finally, Kuro spoke. "The truth is, we sort of weren't telling you the truth earlier. Or not all of it. Abomasnow thinks that the problem is really bad, with a lot of pokémon in the guilds allied with Kyurem. He thought…" she trailed off for a moment, then reluctantly continued, "When Abomasnow heard about Keldeo's horn getting stolen, he knew the other horns would be in danger. Our real task… It was to get Terrakion's horn, if he was here, and bring it back to the Northern Guild where we could protect it. We have the most fortified guild, and it's the hardest to get to. It makes the most sense."

Max believed Kuro, or at least believed that she truly thought what she was doing was right, even if she obviously didn't like all the lying it had taken to get to this point. And though Max had never met Abomasnow, everything he'd ever heard about any of the guildmasters and deputies led him to want to trust them completely.

But something is still wrong… And without more proof that the Southern Guild is really so corrupt as they think, I don't think I can let them take that horn. "So are you saying… Did you actually, you know, take it?"

Aiden guiltily reached behind a nearby bush with his paw and slid Terrakion's horn out into the growing moonlight. "They didn't suspect us since they'd seen us around the guild earlier, so the two pokémon on duty weren't ready when we attacked them," he whined, sounding absolutely miserable about it. "We took it and hurried out of the guild and came here. We're supposed to be meeting up with some of our other Northern Guild members any time now, right here. That was the plan - take the horn and meet up here if the horn was at this guild, and it was."

"But you guys, we've gotta take it back to the Southern Guild," Max said urgently, while still trying to be nice about it. "I mean, I know your guildmaster ordered you and all, but really - you can't just take it."

"I know. We feel guilty about it, too," Kuro admitted. "But Abomasnow's always been a great guildmaster, and I trust his judgment. If he thinks there's something wrong with the other guilds, then we're going to do what he says. But listen, we didn't want you to come here to debate it with you. We're just really worried about you!"

Aiden nodded emphatically. "If Guildmaster is right, then you'd be in a lot of danger here, too! Just come back with us, please? I mean, we maybe haven't known you that long, but I'd be really sad if something happened just because we left you here… And Abomasnow also thinks it'd be bad if Kyurem catches any more humans."

Why did things have to happen like this? "I'm sorry, but I can't go with you. And if you really insist on taking that horn… Well, I think I'm going to have to try to stop you, at least. I can't just let you go." Max tensed, readying himself for battle despite the fact that one of his wings would still be more or less useless. It was two-on-one, and he knew that Team FireFang was no pushover. He had a type advantage, but-

"No hard feelings… But we've gotta do what we've gotta do, too," Kuro said as both she and Aiden prepared themselves.

Determined, Max gathered energy within himself, preparing to use his ancientpower to start off the battle. But before he could loose the attack, something came up from the cliff-like side of the plateau and hit him from behind like a ton of bricks, and he felt acute pain as something bit into his shoulder, sending waves of cold flooding over him as the ice fang froze that area.

Max struggled against his attacker as it kept its grip and continued to charge on, slamming into both Kuro and Aiden with the full force of its momentum. And it was only then, with Team FireFang temporarily down and the attacker finally stopped, that Max caught a good look at him.

It was a linoone, of that there was no doubt. But it was a linoone unlike anything Max had ever seen. Its fur was icy white, its stripes a pale blue, and its long claws were made entirely of ice. It was larger than any linoone Max had ever heard of by a good amount, and stronger, too, judging by how effortlessly it was able to drag Max along.

The similarity to the evil version of Emma was not lost on Max, nor was the fact that linoone was the evolved form of zigzagoon.

"Cody?" Max exclaimed as he continued to fight against the linoone's grip.

But Cody didn't respond; he was just as far gone as Emma. Max fought on as the linoone ignored the wing attacks he was receiving to his face. Instead, Cody caught sight of the other thing he was looking for: Terrakion's horn. It took him only a moment to grasp it in a claw, and another moment to press the horn against his side. Out of the corner of his eye, Max saw the horn freeze to the linoone's icy fur, securing it to his side and leaving his paws free to run.

Kuro and Aiden were up again, and both fired off flamethrowers. But they were too late; Cody was already running away, and there were few things that could keep up with even an average linoone when running at full sprint.

No no no, I don't want the same thing to happen to me as happened to Emma and Cody! Max thought as he quickly realized he was running out of time. The ice around where Cody was biting down was spreading quickly, and seemingly turning Max's blood to slush. He could already feel his attacks growing more sluggish; but being in the position that he was, drug along at high speeds against the unforgiving rocky ground of the plateau, there wasn't anything he could do.

But I've gotta do something, I've gotta do something… No, someone has to save me! I can't do a thing!

"MAX!"

Max jerked his head upright and turned as best he could to look up towards the sky some distance behind them. Though it was fully dark by now, he could still see the black silhouette of some massive bird passing across the stars, like an angel of death in the black of the night.

Angel of death though she might have been, it wasn't death for Max. His heart soared as Mandibuzz shouted down, "Keep fighting! Slow him down so I can deal with him!" There was a murderous tone in her voice, and he thought about how motherly Mandibuzz usually was not only to him, but to all the guild members.

Mess with the guild, and you mess with her! he thought hopefully as, in one last-ditch attempt, he mustered up the strength for an ancientpower attack.

Though not strong, the energy bursting out of Max was unexpected, and caught Cody in an awkward way. The linoone dropped Max as he tripped, and they both tumbled forward roughly, unable to stop themselves due to the speed at which they'd been going.

The impact really jostled Max, but it was forceful enough to knock the ice from his feathers, freeing him up again and allowing him to move more freely as he pushed himself to his feet. However, he was no sooner on his feet than he found himself facing down Cody not ten feet away from him.

Cody made a move as if to come at him again; but another, this time wordless screech descended from the sky, causing him to pause. It was a warning. Any moment, Guildmaster Mandibuzz would attack. Strong though Cody was now, Max doubted that he would get away unscathed from the rage of Mandibuzz.

He's going to run, taking the horn with him, Max thought, his mind racing. *I just have to hold him off for another moment. It won't be too hard. Just a moment. If I get knocked out immediately, or he gets*

ahold of me again, that might be the end of it, he'll grab me and Mandibuzz might not be able to catch up again… Or with the type advantage, he might be able to knock out Mandibuzz, in which case it'd be over for me even if I can stall for long enough for her to catch up.

But I can do it. I can fight him, stall him for Mandibuzz, and we can take him down together. I know I can. I have to.

He heard his sister's scream in his mind.

I have to. For her.

He came to that decision, but he remained immobile, staring at the icy demon.

If not for her, then for who?

A twitch of motion betrayed Cody's intentions. In another moment, the linoone would be running faster than even Guildmaster Mandibuzz could hope to compete with. It was now or never.

Someone else will come. Guildmaster Mandibuzz will stop him. I… I can't. I'm stuck here.

The linoone turned and fled like gleaming arrow through the night, and Max did nothing to stop him.

I really still am a coward… I might have decided to fight Emma back at Mountain Warrens, but nothing has changed. Not really.

Less than a minute later, Guildmaster Mandibuzz landed next to him, apparently seeing that she couldn't catch up with Cody even if she tried. "Max, are you okay? You're shoulder - and you're shivering! That looks like it was one nasty ice fang attack! We've got to get you back to the guild and-"

Max couldn't help himself. So much stress had been building over time. And no matter how many times his life was in danger, he

couldn't get used to it. And, moreover, his failure was coupled with fear. He hadn't been able bring himself to fight for his sister, though he wanted to despite Zeke and Kara's advice to fight for himself. Instead, all he had done was wait for someone else to fix the problem, wait for things to go away.

He was afraid, and he was disgusted at himself, so he couldn't help it. He moved against Guildmaster Mandibuzz's side and stayed there huddled in her feathers. Not crying, not distraught with the onslaught of feelings. Just numb, and wanting the sort of motherly protection that he knew she could give.

Mandibuzz didn't so much as miss a beat at this sudden, less than socially orthodox action. Instead, she wrapped a wing around him and said, "I'm here, and you're safe. It's okay, it's okay. Let's just get you home."

Oh, hey, it's the Northern Guild! I kinda forgot they existed… lol, jk. But now they come into the story FULL FORCE, complete with lots of espionage and The Language of Life cameos. Speaking of which, did I ever mention that Aiden is the same growlithe as in TLOL, and Kuro is supposed to be Hope's houndour/houndoom? Yeah, it's true. And if you've read the story, the fact that they have cameos in here actually makes *sense*, though I assure you that is the only bit of overlap there will be between the two stories.

So, it's days like today where I start the chapter and write until it's finished that reminds me how much of my life this sucks away. About seven or eight hours straight of writing, then another over an hour of editing? Good times, good times… But it's okay. I'm on a train, it's not like I have anything better to do than write fanfiction and level grind my SoulSilver Nuzlocke pokémon against the Elite Four.

In other news, I might very soon start writing a LeafGreen Nuzlocke fic on the side, more for fun than the level of seriousness that I treat other fics… Although trust me, I've still got plenty of plot in mind. ^_^ If you're got me on author alert, then keep an eye out for it! No

guarantee, but there's a good chance I'll do it once I finally get tired of this SoulSilver game.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 22: Team Rebirth

Chapter Twenty-Two: Team Rebirth

"Are we too late?"

Everyone in the group - Team ShadowSpark included - had put aside whatever differences they had in order to rush back to the guild. Though the whole situation in Cobalion's cave had been overwhelming from start to finish, Bulbasaur and Vulpix had caught enough of the legend's conversation with Edge to know that the Western Guild was where the scyther was heading next. And everyone agreed that the safety of the guild and Reshiram himself were of the top priority; supposed traitors could be dealt with later. With both Virizion's and Cobalion's horns in Edge's possession, no one wanted to find what he might be able to do next should he reach his goal.

They didn't have time to wait for Cobalion to awaken. Some teams stayed behind to care for him and arrange for his transportation back to the guild, while the rest that had been on the scene went on ahead to stop the scyther.

But as they all entered the guild, they immediately saw that *something* had happened. Blood spattered the floor hear and there, and scorch marks from attacks showed up even on the dark cave walls.

That scyther is tough, it's true… Vulpix thought worriedly as they continued down the entrance passageway in silence. *But the flying types that were on the island of Twisted Dunes with us must have gotten back here first? Surely with that warning, those still at the guild-*

But her fears were confirmed as she and the others entered the main gathering space of the guild, where the bright spiderweb of electric

filaments starkly lit the aftermath of the battle.

Five or six pokémon were lying around, some knocked out and some simply nursing their injuries. Thankfully, none of the injuries seemed all that serious, and everyone in the room was definitely alive as Miltank, the most experienced healer at this guild, tended to injuries.

But even though everyone was mostly okay, the less-than-happy looks on their faces told that the battle had not gone in their favor.

While the other teams went over to the pokémon they knew best to find out what happened, Team Rebirth did the same, hurrying to Charmeleon's side. Though he'd been a jerk those first few weeks Team Rebirth had been at the guild, he'd been quite a bit friendlier ever since helping with Vulpix's trouble with Streya the sneasel. He still carried on the tough guy façade, but otherwise he was no longer nearly so hostile.

"What happened?" Bulbasaur urged as they came to Charmeleon, where he was tenderly holding his arm to his side, a shallow but painful cut scored along its length.

He spat out a bit of flame, as if disgusted with himself. "We shouldn't have left the guild so empty. Even Emolga and Zebstrika were out helping with the search for the remaining Warriors. The birds that were up in your neck of the woods during the Cobalion thing came and warned us, but we just didn't have that many fighters here at the guild. That scyther snuck in at night, and all the flying-types who had made it back couldn't help once he was already in - corridors are too narrow for them to fly well. There were enough of us that we'd have beat him in an honest battle, but… Well, he wasn't really even fighting us. He dodged past us, went straight down the tunnels, and ended up here. And then…"

Charmeleon looked straight up at the orb of steel that was embedded in the center of the ceiling, the stone that electric-types shocked every morning in order to keep the entire guild alight.

"I don't think that scyther even knew what exactly he was doing, because he definitely wasn't expecting it either, at least not right then," Charmeleon continued. "He had a bag with him, and something in it started to glow - I'm guessing it was those horns he got. And the orb at the center of the ceiling glowed, too, and out of it came this white stone."

With his uninjured arm, he gestured to a small, unobtrusive white orb that lay on the ground some ways a way. It was so unexceptional that Vulpix and Bulbasaur hadn't even noticed it until now.

Charmeleon continued, "The scyther grabbed the orb while it was still floating in the air. We all just sort of watched. Didn't know what to do, or what would happen."

"And?" Bulbasaur asked when Charmeleon didn't immediately continue. "What *did* happen?"

Charmeleon shrugged. "Nothing. Nothing at all. And that Edge guy got frustrated, and then he left before we could stop him. Didn't even take the orb with him, and none of us have dared to touch it. That thing's supposed to summon Reshiram, right?"

Bulbasaur nodded. "I guess so… And what about Virizion? Is he okay? He made it back here, right?"

"He was still healing lower in the guild, last I heard," Charmeleon said. "Edge didn't go after him, if that's what you're wondering."

"And what about Alexa?" Vulpix asked. *If she went after a pokémon like that scyther and it ended up not really being who she thought it was… Well, I don't want to think about it.* "You know, that pidgey who's a human. Did she show up here?"

"Yeah, with the rest of the bird pokémon, I think. Wasn't really paying that much attention," Charmeleon said. "But I can't say I've seen her since the battle. So anyway, what's this stupid rumor I hear about you working for Kyurem, Vulpix? Got fed up of taking orders from-"

There was a commotion near one of the entrances into this chamber, and all of a sudden Deputy Zebstrika came charging in with Guildmaster Emolga perched on his head.

"-those guys," Charmeleon finished.

Both Emolga and Zebstrika were searching at Twisted Dunes too, Vulpix thought. *No doubt the bird pokémon that stayed behind spread the news of what was going on to everyone still searching, including them. And that means… that means they've already heard of what Cobalion tried to do to me, and what he said I am.*

"We headed here as soon as we heard," Zebstrika said as he took in the scene. "But it appears we're already too late. Is everyone all right?"

"Just a few cuts, sir!" Miltank said, breaking away from her current patient for a few moments to give her report. "Nothing serious."

Emolga jumped up and down a bit, still on top of her deputy's head. "Yay yay yay! No one's hurt! Oh, and look, Zebby!"

She glided off his head in a shower of sparks, landing on the ground right next to the white sphere. She excitedly picked it up and raised it above her head. "Looky looky looky! It's the Light Stone! So Reshiram's still safe!"

Zebstrika gave an audible sigh of relief. "In that case, there's still other business that needs attending to. Anyone in here who was with Cobalion not too long ago, I need to know - is what I heard true? Did he really call Vulpix a servant of Kyurem?"

Vulpix shrunk a bit against Bulbasaur's side, terribly conscious of the gazes that suddenly turned to her.

"Yeah, that's right!" Raichu of Team ShadowSpark said. "He even tried to kill her! We've gotta do something about her, right?"

Deputy Zebstrika walked over to where Bulbasaur, Vulpix, and Charmeleon all were. "Is this true, you two?" he asked Team Rebirth.

Vulpix just looked down at the ground, unable to answer. Bulbasaur hesitated for a second, then said, "Yes, but it's gotta be a misunderstanding! Vulpix isn't-"

"Cobalion doesn't misunderstand things like this," Zebstrika said, cutting Bulbasaur's argument off.

"You've got to be joking, right?" Charmeleon suddenly spoke up, incredulous. "I mean, look at her. She's nothing more than a magikarp out of water. I don't think she could be evil like that even if she tried."

Zebstrika glared at Charmeleon. "Are you disrespecting my judgment?"

Charmeleon scratched at his muzzle, feigning nonchalance. "Only 'cuz you've got bad judgment, at least right now."

"Guys, calm calm down!" Guildmaster Emolga said as she waddled over, Light Stone clutched against her stomach - small though it was, it was still large enough compared to her tiny body. "No fighting allowed, nope nope!"

"But Guildmaster, you don't actually believe this flame-brained idea that a wimp like Vulpix is working for Kyurem, do you? Heck, I don't even like the brat, but there's no way this is true." Charmeleon argued.

Vulpix felt gratitude rush through her. Charmeleon was defending her. Even though it was in his own less-than-flattering way, she still appreciated him sticking up for her.

"Nope, I don't believe it!" Emolga said, causing both Bulbasaur and Vulpix to pick themselves up a bit.

Zebstrika seemed taken aback. "But guildmaster, based on what Cobalion said, we at the very least need to lock her up. Especially with the Light Stone here, we can't let her get her paws on it."

Emolga frowned. "But Vulpix is a guild member! We can't do that to her! I trust her - see, here!" She rolled the Light Stone forward, and it bumped up against Vulpix's paw. Vulpix suddenly felt a chill run from her ice collar through her entire body, but other than that, nothing happened. She simply stared blankly at the white sphere, wondering what it possibly could do to summon a pokémon as strong as Reshiram.

"See see!" Emolga said. "She doesn't take it! So she's not with Kyurem, right right?"

Zebstrika shook his head, clearly exasperated. "Guildmaster, she's surrounded by pokémon much stronger than her who would obviously stop her if she tried to take it. This doesn't prove anything!"

"It doesn't?"

Zebstrika shook his head again, and Vulpix saw other guild members glancing at each other disbelievingly, alternately appalled and amused by Emolga's seeming innocence.

Emolga twitched her tail thoughtfully. "Well, how about this! Vulpix, if you're working for Kyurem, then go ahead and take the stone now! I'll make sure no one else stops you, okay? I promise!"

"Guildmaster, that's ins-" Deputy Zebstrika took a step forward as he spoke, only to be stopped in his tracks as a powerful bolt of lightning - more powerful by far than any lightning attack Vulpix had ever seen - scorched the ground right in front of him. Everyone in the room felt the charge go through the air, and the ceiling flared brighter than before.

And Emolga hadn't even turned towards Zebstrika to fire off that tremendously powerful, tremendously accurate attack.

"Zebstrika, I mean it. You accuse a guild member, I give her the power to live up to it," Emolga said. Suddenly, her voice wasn't the high-pitched, childish sing-song that it normally was. It was low, dangerous, and serious. Turning to Vulpix, Emolga continued in that serious voice, "The next move is yours, Vulpix."

Vulpix was still nearly speechless from the shock of seeing her guildleader actually taking something seriously. And, for some reason, she didn't doubt that Emolga would follow through with her promise to fight off anyone and everyone who might try to stop her.

Take the stone.

A voice whispered to Vulpix somewhere in the deepest recesses of her mind; she felt her body temperature plummet, her collar tighten. Something else was working through her, taking control of her, and she couldn't do anything about it. She reached out to the stone with her head, as if to bite down and take hold of it. Closer she inched to it, and closer-

No! If Guildmaster Emolga is trusting me, I'm not going to betray that trust!

In one massive effort, she change her head's course and nudged the stone away from her so that it rolled to Guildmaster Emolga's feet. All of a sudden, the pressure from her necklace receded, and she felt back to normal again.

"No thank you, Guildmaster," Vulpix said quietly, feeling at once both victorious and appalled over what had nearly happened. "I want to help everyone wake up Reshiram, not steal away the one chance at waking him."

The tenseness in the air dissipated almost instantly as Emolga became her usual self once again. "See see everyone? Vulpy is a fellow guild member! I don't care what Coby says, and I'll tell him that myself! In fact, he'll be here soon, right? And I bet Virizion will wake up soon, too, and I don't want them to be stupid and attack you

again, Vulpy! Nope nope, that'd be bad. So why don't you two stay in your room for the rest of the day, get a good rest? I'll get everything sorted out, not to worry worry worry!"

Though everyone was still a bit dazed, Bulbasaur managed to reply, "I… I think that'd be a good idea." Then, more excited as he realized that Vulpix had been exonerated by the one person who mattered most in the guild, he added, "And thanks for believing in her!"

Vulpix caught on as well. "Yes, thank you!" She wasn't sure when it had happened, but all of a sudden she realized that the Guildmaster's belief in her meant a lot to her, not just because she was the guildmaster but because she was… Well, she was Emolga.

Bulbasaur believes in me, Guildmaster Emolga believes in me, and even Charmeleon believes in me… For me, that's just enough. Even if the Warriors are the ones condemning me, I think I can weather it now.

"All right, you two! You can meet Coby and Virizy now!" Emolga said when she appeared in their doorway the next morning.

Vulpix and Bulbasaur gave each other dubious looks. *I trust Emolga, but… Are those two really just going to sit back and* not *kill me?*

Bubasaur put their mutual doubts into words. "And they're not going to attack her?"

Emolga nodded. "Yup yup yup! I threatened to battle them if they tried to fight rather than talk talk things out. That made 'em think twice!" she giggled a bit, then jumped up, pivoted quickly in midair, and began gliding back down the hall. "Now come on you two! Let's go go go and get this silly thing sorted out!"

They followed her without any argument, but as they went through the tunnels, Vulpix whispered to Bulbasaur, "Guildmaster Emolga is wonderful, but… She's kinda scary, too."

"They say that all the guildmasters are at least on par with the Four Warriors in terms of battle," Bulbasaur said. "And they say that Guildmaster Emolga and Guildmaster Abomasnow are even a cut above the others. Yesterday was the first time I've actually seen Emolga do anything seriously… But that was one wicked thunder attack. The rumors have got to be true. Good thing she's on our side, huh?"

Vulpix nodded as they entered the main gathering space. Practically the whole guild was back now that all the searches for the Four Warriors were over, and nearly all of them were gathered into this room to see what happened next. Vulpix didn't know who's plan it was to have everyone in the room, but she had mixed feelings about it. On one hand, *most* of these pokémon would probably stand behind Emolga's commands if she ordered them to hold back Virizion and Cobalion. On the other hand, this meant they'd all be present in what was essentially a trial of her innocence.

And lately, I'm not too sure if I am *innocent,* Vulpix thought. *I nearly did take the Light Stone yesterday, and Bulbasaur had to wake me up again last night - those sleepwalking nightmares haven't gone away, and I'm worried about them. And I still don't even know what they're about. I'll still fight to prove that my intentions aren't bad, but… I almost feel like I ought to be locked up. Just in case.*

"Okay, everyone, quiet down!" Zebstrika shouted to the rest of the pokémon in the room, sparks flying from his mane; he seemed on-edge, as if this whole scene was distasteful to him.

He'll definitely do as the Guildmaster says, but I still think he sides with the Four Warriors.

Once things were quieter, Emolga spoke up, "Now everyone, we're gonna be civil about this, right right right? All of you in the crowd need to stay quiet quiet no matter what is said, or I'll personally escort you out of the room!" She said this lightly, but by now, everyone had heard of her ferocity from yesterday, though no battle had actually taken place; no one wanted to deal with her.

Content that everyone would be quiet, she turned to Virizion and Cobalion, both of whom were finally on the road to recovery. They were glaring at Vulpix, each tensed as if prepared to pounce on her should Emolga let her guard down. "And I mean Coby and Virizy too, yup yup! This is my guild now, and I'm not going to just stand stand around and let you attack Vulpy! But I'm pretty sure lots of pokémon want to hear what you have to say, and I'm pretty sure Vulpy needs a chance to defend herself, too. So say whatever! You have the floor!"

"Finally," Cobalion said, taking a step forward. "Then let me start with this: you may act like a fool just as you always have, Emolga. But when you were my deputy, your judgment was always sound. So why can you not see the truth now? It fills me with a sense of dread just being in the same room with that vulpix. Her very presence grates on me. The aura around her is unmistakably… Cold. Empty. Even evil, in a sense. And most definitely hungry. All of these are how the weather gods once described Kyurem to Reshiram and Zekrom, and how they in turn warned us Warriors of him. So why do you ignore our words, Emolga?"

"Cobalion speaks the truth," Virizion added, still glaring at Vulpix. "Even that scyther, violent though he was, was not evil. He did not have this same aura. We Warriors of Justice have guarded this land and its inhabitants for age upon age, ever since the weather gods disappeared. We even isolated ourselves these past ten years solely to protect Reshiram and Zekrom in their slumber. Why do you cease to trust us now?"

Emolga giggled. "That's easy! It's 'cuz you weren't wrong before now, but you are now now!" Cobalion and Virizion's scowls deepened at how lightly Emolga dismissed their concerns, but Emolga ignored their reaction. "Okay, Vulpy, it's your turn! And Bulby, you can join in too, if you want, since you know Vulpy Vulpy better than anyone!"

Vulpix had been mentally preparing herself for this moment; she knew exactly what she was going to say. She stood up a bit straighter, terribly conscious of how silly she probably looked: a tiny vulpix, defending herself against these great pokémon of legend.

Even among vulpix, she no doubt looked stupid. Her tails - the pride and joy of any vulpix - still looked crumpled and uneven from the tree that had fallen on them when she'd been chased during the Solstice Games. She doubted they'd ever go back to normal.

But I don't care how I look… I just care who I am. I may not know who I was, or what I did then. But I know who I am now. There are still doubts, but I'm still me, and I'm not just going to let Cobalion and Virizion tell me any differently.

"I'm not what you say," Vulpix started. Her voice was just as quiet as it always had been, but it had lost the uncertain quality it had possessed for so long after waking up in this world. "I don't remember anything up until a few months ago, I admit. I don't remember life as a human, and I don't know if I was in this world for longer than before my memories actually start. But I know that I don't want to hurt this world, or anyone in it. Especially not after everyone at the guild was so nice to me while I was getting used to things here."

"I've known her ever since we both arrived at the guild at the same time, and I know she's telling the truth!" Bulbasaur added. "She's more shy than anything, and she's definitely not evil like you guys are saying!

Cobalion let out a snort of derision. "You lie, Vulpix. You're good at it enough to trick most pokémon here, but still, you lie. Your aura cannot be masked no matter how nice your words are. And what about the other humans? No good has come of them. No doubt you've heard by now that both the deerling and the zigzagoon who were once human are now fighting under Kyurem's control, and with their help he has gathered both Keldeo's and Terrakion's horns. Terrakion hurries to the Eastern Guild now to stop the Dark Stone from falling into the wrong hands, but who knows if he and Keldeo and those of the Eastern Guild will be able to stop them from accomplishing their task? If Kyurem succeeds and summons Zekrom, then we'll all be doomed, I wouldn't doubt. Then there's that scyther, who fights madly and has even killed other pokémon; the

pidgey I've heard of seems not to be malicious herself, yet she abandons this whole quest of helping save the world just to find that one violent scyther. And two Northern Guild friends of that archen stole Terrakion's horn right from under his beak, and if not for assurances from Terrakion that he senses no evil aura around that him, I'd suspect that the archen purposefully let his friends go. How can we possibly trust any human now?"

Some mutterings and even a shout of agreement came from the surrounding crowd, and Vulpix saw for the first time that any suspicion was no longer directed solely at her. Sentiment towards all the humans in this world was increasingly negative.

I almost don't blame them, she thought. *Their world seemed mostly fine until all us humans showed up. I'm sure we all shouldn't get the blame for it, but it certainly looks as if we should.*

Emolga's expression immediately lost all happiness, and angry, dangerous sparks flew from her fur, making the light above seem dim and unimpressive. Everyone quieted down at once, and she returned again to her perky self.

Virizion once again added his part. "Perhaps if you had been the hero, things would've been different, Vulpix. If you had been the one to awaken Reshiram, then your faults might've been forgiven, and we might've been more inclined to believe you. But you even touched the Light Stone in which Reshiram sleeps, and yet he slumbers still; obviously, one of the other humans is the hero destined for him. Though at this rate, I despair that any of you are the ones destined to awaken the two pokémon who embody the very Spirit of our land."

"That's not fair!" Bulbasaur said. "Who knows? Maybe she's Zekrom's hero instead! And if you killed her now, and that was true, then you'd pretty much be dooming us all, wouldn't you?"

Cobalion let out a growl. "We're dooming us all by allowing her to live! She is Kyurem's vassal, make no mistake. The longer she lives,

the more we risk."

For a moment, doubt wormed its way back into Vulpix's heart, and she wondered if perhaps Cobalion was right. *But no, that can't be right. I don't want it to be right. And I… Even if he* is *right and it was for the good of this world for me to die, I'm not sure I'd just lay down and die. Certainly not at the hooves a pokémon who won't even listen to me. I don't want to die. But…*

She pushed the doubt back out, and responded, "I know my intentions are good. But… I will admit that there's something wrong with me. When I woke up in Glowstone Caverns, I had this ice collar on. But it was smaller then, more like a necklace with an ice pendant. It grew once before thanks to a sneasel, and it made me almost… Almost like I was in a trance, like with what happened to the weather gods. The sneasel said something about the Cold One back then. Another fire-type managed to melt the collar to what it was."

"Vulpix, you shouldn't even be talking about that! None of that was your fault! Streya was controlling you!" Bulbasaur insisted.

Vulpix looked at him sadly, but she was certain that this needed to be said. She continued as if he hadn't interrupted. "Lately, it's been growing again," Her voice was getting quieter the more she spoke, as if the weight of all this truth weighed down on her, slowly mounting against her. "I've been having nightmares and sleepwalking. Yesterday, when Guildmaster Emolga offered me the Light Stone… I almost took it. Something was trying to make me take it. I fought it off, but this aura that you sense around me… I do think Kyurem has some sort of hold on me."

"You see!" Cobalion said. "She even admits to it! We have no choice to-"

"But I'm innocent!" Vulpix suddenly shouted, more loudly even than Cobalion's booming, commanding voice. "I don't want Kyurem's control over me, and I'm doing everything to fight it! I don't want to

hurt anyone. And I definitely don't deserve to be killed before I've even done anything wrong!"

Cobalion began to argue back, but Virizion stepped between him and Vulpix suddenly, forcing Cobalion to meet his eyes. "Cobalion, halt a moment. I assumed as you did, that the only reason this vulpix gave off such an aura and yet did not act as if controlled was because she was consciously and willingly serving Kyurem. If what she says is true… Then regardless of the risk, I would not feel it right to kill her."

"But she clearly lies!" Cobalion said. "You heard how Reshiram and Zekrom described Kyurem. Kyurem is defined by his bottomless hunger. No one else, not even the weather gods, were able to maintain their minds once Kyurem had latched onto them. The only possibility is that she herself welcomed Kyurem's influence, and that Kyurem in turn granter her autonomy until she becomes of more use to him completely consumed, as the deerling and zigzagoon were."

"So now we're just figuring out if her intentions are nice and not if Kyurem's got something to do with her, right right?" Emolga piped up. "Well, that one's easy! Even if she's got that silly collar thing, she's definitely still Vulpy! She'd never never never want to hurt anyone, like she said!"

Bulbasaur stepped nearer to Vulpix. "That's right! She's been my partner through-and-through. And you know, I'm even terrified of fire, but I still trust her even though she knows better fire attacks than a lot of fire types! That's how much I'm sure she's nice, and that she'd never try to betray anyone here."

There was a sudden cheer from somewhere in the crowd; Vulpix was pretty sure that it was Fi, one of the four abra quadruplets of the four guilds. Fi had always been nice to her, and it was nice to hear her support now.

And in response to that one cheer, the room crescendoed with a roar (albeit a tentative roar) of support. And once it became clear that

Emolga seemed completely fine with this, the roar grew more certain. At least a third of the guild seemed to be standing with her, and it was maybe only another third who was outright against her.

Still, that third of the guild that supported - majority though it certainly wasn't - seemed enough to sway Virizion. Once again, he spoke to Cobalion, "Surely her Spirit comes across to you as different from the aura we're feeling, does it not? Even an accomplished liar can only do so much to hide her true intentions, and her intentions do not seem to match up with the aura I sense. There is a disjunction, and the support she receives despite our own skepticism goes far to prove that she speaks the truth. Or do you still doubt the judgment of the one you appointed to lead your guild in your stead?"

Emolga grinned broadly.

Cobalion sent one last, penetrating glance in Vulpix's direction. Then he relaxed somewhat and said, "I am still not happy about it. Yet… I do agree. There are too many discrepancies right now, and she has yet to actually do anything to prove that she is what I fear she is. I would still prefer to kill her right now, for the sake of the world. To protect everyone, I would stoop to such an act."

The fur along Vulpix back bristled as she continued to stand her ground, looking at him definiantly.

But he continued, "Yet if I did so now, it would also not sit well with me. I retract my intention to kill you, Vulpix… At least, for now. But Emolga, I must insist that we put her under constant watch, and keep her well secured here within the guild."

"But that's completely unfair, too!" Bulbasaur burst out. "She doesn't deserve to be cooped up in here-"

"Bulbasaur, it's okay," Vulpix said, calming herself and finally sitting down, ready and willing to give herself over to the one course of action she thought she deserved. "I'm afraid I might do something bad, too, especially with the Light Stone so close. I'd rather have

someone watch me. I'd rather be safe than have Cobalion proved correct."

"Well, I'm okey-dokey with that if Vulpy is!" Emolga said. "Coby and Virizy, I'll assign some of the guild members not assigned to guard the stone to help you with that, yep yep! So since that's everything, I guess we're all done done here. Right right, Coby, Virizy?"

Cobalion nodded, and Virizion said, "I will take the first watch. Vulpix, if you would be so kind?"

Vulpix gave a sad, yet relieved sort of nod, then led the way to her and Bulbasaur's room. Or, rather, it wasn't quite a room anymore; now it would be a prison. But she was okay with that.

It won't be fun sitting in my room all day for who knows how long until this is all resolved. But at least I'll finally be able to not be so afraid of what I might do.

I grow impatient. My hunger will not wait any longer.

Vulpix found herself standing in the mist, her feet firmly planted on some rocky floor. She recognized this feeling, this mist, and the sensation of ice slowly creeping farther up her head and down her body. Though she could never remember her nightmares upon awakening, in sleep they remained chillingly familiar.

Come to me. Both you and Reshiram are rightly mine. I will give you the purpose in life that you so longed for as a human. Come to me, give yourself and Reshiram to me. Then and only then can you fulfill your purpose. We can right what is wrong with this world. Everything will be as it should be. Reshiram, Zekrom and I shall become one once again.

As always, the words sounded so promising. They promised and hinted at the things she wanted - peace in this world, knowledge of her old self. They always caught her off guard at first, lowering her

into a false sense of security such that she didn't even realize she was walking forward through the mist. It was only when she saw a shape looming in the dimness that she remembered that she didn't want to go to this voice, she didn't want to follow it and sacrifice herself to it. She prepared to fight it as she always did. She prepared to scream, she reached up a paw to scratch at the ice as it grew.

But this time, she couldn't. This time, the thing that controlled her made sure to stop her. The ice at her neck suddenly seemed to shoot out and into her, filling her with pain as it flooded her very veins with its chill. She instinctively cried out, only to have her own throat and mouth rebel, choking back the cry before so much as a peep could come out.

No longer was she in control of herself. Not in the slightest.

The ice pulled on her, like puppet strings sewn into her very nerves. The ice closed in on that inner part of her that warmed her, where her fire for attacks was stoked, and it squeezed it while the rest of her body tensed, responding to the muscle memory. A fire blast was forced out of her, and it cut through the mist and illuminated Cobalion, her current guard, as he fell to the ground. He'd been caught off guard. Perhaps he'd become cocky, thinking that this little Vulpix could never best him, not now that he was mostly healed.

And by herself, perhaps that was true. But at the cost of her own comfort and the control of her own body, the ice was empowering her. She followed up with another fire blast and, like the last, it came out with such force and pent-up energy that it scorched her throat and mouth on its way out. Tears would have come to her eyes in response to the biting pain, yet even that was controlled utterly by the cold puppet master.

Cobalion let out a half-roar, but the force controlling her was anticipating this. No doubt it was the last thing that Kyurem wanted; neither Vulpix nor the Light Stone would be able to escape if the guild was awoken, and guard on her would be tripled after something like this. She would never have another chance to escape.

Unwillingly, she fired off another fire blast, this time straight into his open mouth.

The type advantage, the power, the quickness of the barrage and accuracy of the attacks - even for Cobalion, they were too much. He passed out.

None shall stand in my way. You and Reshiram - I hunger for both of you. Come to me, and bring him with you.

She did everything she could to resist, but her efforts were in vain. Her feet hurried onward through the twisting caverns, faster than she could normally have managed. Though she hadn't been told of the exact location of the Light Stone within the guild, Kyurem's hunger guided her quickly and surely through what should have been a maze to anyone not familiar with the guild.

But Vulpix soon heard a roar behind her, and the heavy charge of feet. It was muffled in her dream, yet she heard it well enough to make a guess at what was going on.

Cobalion faked being knocked out to stop me from attacking him until he was really knocked out. My attacks didn't do as much damage as Kyurem thought! Vulpix thought, her hopes rising even as she wound her way ever deeper into the caves. *I'm not like Emma and Cody yet, I bet! I still don't have as much power as them, which means… There's definitely a chance! Surely they'll all stop me!*

Then her heart plummeted. She was already here. She could see shapes through the mist, no doubt the guards of the Light Stone. Two of them she didn't recognize, but there was one whose shape she knew, even in the blurry mist.

Bulbasaur… Oh no. He wanted to help out with guarding the Light Stone!

The pokémon here were caught of guard, just like with Cobalion; no doubt they were too far into the caves to have heard his earlier

shout, and he was nowhere to be seen now, maybe having made a wrong turn in the dim caverns.

To each of the guards - Charmeleon, Bulbasaur, and Raichu - Vulpix in that moment before she attacked looked much the same as she always did. The only difference was the thin layer of frost that covered her from head to toe, covering even her eyes like a glaze.

The fire swelled up insider her, and once again her fire blast shot outward, encompassing all three of the guards where they stood at the entrance of room. And in the last moment before it hit, Vulpix saw Bulbasaur's expression through the flames.

Vulpix's heart might as well have been made of ice at that moment, because it felt as if it shattered when she saw the pure terror in his eyes.

Though she knew she didn't have the power of Emma or Cody, Kyurem was nonetheless pushing her body to its limits. The fire blast alone had enough force behind it knock out Bulbasaur immediately, badly damage Raichu, and at least stun Charmeleon. As they tried to recover, she darted past them and into the chamber where the Light Stone sat, alone on the barren floor.

Stop, now! I won't! I refuse! I don't want to do this! She struggled mentally and physically, trying to fight it.

You have no choice.

She picked it up in her mouth and headed back towards the entrance of the room. She could make out the flaming tail of the shadow in the mist that was trying to stop her; it had to be Charmeleon.

My mouth is full now, maybe I won't be able to attack and Charmeleon will stop-

Her body moved on its own, darting past Charmeleon. He managed to land a metal claw attack that cut into her left hind flank as she

went, but she was too nimble for him to stop.

The new wound hurt Vulpix, and under normal conditions she might have found herself unable to continue using the leg. But these weren't normal circumstances. The icy threads within her pulled her onward, ignoring the injury as she went through the tunnels. Pokémon were rushing around now, but most of them seemed unprepared for her; she managed to rush past them all as they stumbled over each other in the dark to catch up to her.

Why aren't they ready for me? Surely Cobalion told them that I'd be heading to the surface if I successfully grabbed the Light Stone; surely they know to guard the exits, keep me from escaping? Surely-

Vulpix was finally at one of the exits, and there was indeed a large group of pokémon there. But none were facing her direction. She dashed around and over them, finally emerging into the starlit night.

And only then, as she suddenly found herself dashing through a small army of pokémon - namely ice-types - did she understand why the pokémon in the caves hadn't been ready for her, why they'd all been focused on something else. Perhaps Cobalion had managed to spread word of Vulpix's escape to some, but everyone else was too busy rushing to the defense of the guild to expect Vulpix's betrayal from the inside.

Those who believe in me and the power I can give them, and my hope of righting the world… They fight for your escape. They are too small a force to win. Your guild will soon be in pursuit of you. So come, hurry to me. All will be as it should be. Soon, I shall be whole once more.

Vulpix continued to fight mentally, straining against his control. But still she got farther and farther away from her guild - her home - unable to so much as pause herself for a moment.

Bulbasaur, Emolga, everyone… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, come get me! For your world's sake, and for my own sake as well!

That just happened.

Anyway… I think I'm officially going to stick to just a chapter a week. Though I *could* get one out every few days, the couple times I did that were kinda annoying. So yeah, Thursday updates as usual. (I actually could've gotten this one out earlier since I just needed to edit it the past couple days, but I was busy playing Pokémon Conquest… Practically no plot, but fun gameplay.)

In other news, I've got a new fanfic going - it's a Nuzlocke run of LeafGreen! It's more for fun than anything (I mean, I'm not even editing it or anything), but please check it out if you're interested! There will be a good bit of plot changes, and I've got my own unique rule additions, but still a pretty classic Nuzlocke run all around. Do note that it's rated M, mainly for language. So if you don't like obscene amounts of swearing (completely the opposite of the rest of my stories), then I suggest you don't read. Updates for that will be very, very sporadic, and not interfere with this fic at all.

Anyway, hope you liked the chapter! What will happen next? Will Vulpix be okay? You'll have to wait a bit to see… (The little joys of being an author. ^_^)

EDIT: Changed Chansey to Miltank, since I realized that I'd already designated a miltank as the Western Guild's healer in a previous chapter and had completely forgotten about it.

Chapter 23: Alexa

Chapter Twenty-Three: Alexa

"Hey, wait up a minute!"

The scyther, who had been flying quickly between the frosted trees of Glittering Forest, slowed himself and landed silently on the snowy ground before turning around to face his pursuer.

"I don't have time to mess with you, Pidgey," the scyther said. "Even if I didn't have my next opponent already in mind, you would be too weak to bother with."

The scyther made as if to fly off again, but at that moment Alexa finally caught up and flitted to a branch above him. "Ah, come on, and I've been looking for you for months! Give me a break - you *are* Edge, right?"

The scyther was intrigued enough to stay put, for the moment at least. "Yes."

"And you're a human, right? That's what Cobalion said," Alexa asked.

"Yes," he answered, his expression inscrutable.

Alexa grinned as best a pidgey can. *I don't know why I know it, but it's gotta be him. I'm sure of it.* "Okay, here's the deal. I beat you in battle, you tell me what your *real* name is. Deal?"

Edge finally turned all the way to face her, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "And why would you think Edge isn't my real name?"

If you really were named only Edge, you would've left by now, I'm sure of it. I've got you now! "Guess if you beat me, I'll tell you."

"If?" Edge said as he tensed and let out a brief snort of derision. He took off the bag that he had at his side and let it slip to the ground, apparently not wanting it in his way. "You mean when. And by the time I'm through with you, you won't be in any condition to be telling me anything."

Alexa felt her heart almost shrivel inside her chest, and doubt filled her. *The person I know… He wouldn't do that. Wouldn't threaten like that. Would he? Did I get the wrong human? And if so… What have I gotten myself into?*

She didn't have a chance to take back her battle challenge. Edge was already coming at her, wings buzzing and scythes raised. Alexa let out a little chirrup of surprise and dove off the other direction, darting through branches as only a flying pokémon of her size could manage.

But her maneuvering didn't hold the scyther back much. Even in flight, he used his scythes to cut through the small branches Alexa was weaving between.

Well, I've already got myself into this mess… Guess I've got no choice! After all, there's still a chance it's him! She flew upward and abruptly turned, then flapped her wings wildly to send a gust attack his way. The powdery snow that covered the trees like a glaze of white glitter was sent flying forward with the blast of wind, partly blinding the attacker.

Edge was caught off guard and blown backwards, but it took him only a couple moments to right himself. He was obviously a skilled flier, especially for a scyther. In a test of just flying, Alexa would of course have won - she was better made for it, and moreover, she was a natural at it.

But this wasn't a flying test.

Now that she'd tried an attack, all of her earlier momentum was gone. Scyther emerged from the cloud of snow that swirled like a

bright ghost in the dimness of the undergrowth, and he took a swing at Alexa with one of his scythes.

Agility! It was her best bet, and that technique raised her speed just enough to get away, once again starting her retreat.

Edge was clearly frustrated with her constant dodging, and he came after her now with that anger fueling him.

This isn't the human I know! Oh, dear Arceus, what have I gotten myself into? I barely know a thing about battling!

She had one more chance. Though she'd barely bothered to learn how to battle and do more than the most basic attacks, she'd spent countless hours honing her flying skills. And with all that practice, she'd picked up one more attack in particular, something so fast that to anyone else she disappeared for a moment during flight.

All right, it'll be difficult in these trees, but I'll give it a try! She gave one mighty flap of her wings and, using the incredible burst of speed that followed, she flew upward and then upside-down and then downwards in a tight loop, just barely dodging branch after branch as her wake blew the snow into the air, creating a mini snowstorm. She could see the surprise in the scyther's eyes when she finally made contact, hitting him in the back of the head beak-first - he'd barely even realized she'd disappeared.

The attack hit hard, and Edge fell towards the ground. But Alexa wasn't used to actually hitting anything while in flight, especially during something so difficult as an aerial ace attack. She tumbled towards the ground as well, unable to catch herself as branches at once both slowed her fall and further disoriented her. In open space, she easily could have opened her wings and been flying once more. But not here.

The lightness of her body meant that the branches slowed her fall more than they did for Edge. But, much to her dismay, she saw in

the midst of her tumbling that Edge had easily recovered from the attack and had landed on his feet.

And now, he was just waiting for her to fall into the reach of his blades.

Alexa redoubled her efforts, opening her wings and trying to catch herself in the last moments before falling into him. She had slowed enough by now that it wasn't too difficult to latch onto a passing branch with her talons and start to take off again. But she was dazed, and far too slow. In another moment, Edge had leapt up to meet her head-on, swinging a scythe and cutting into the leading edge of her right wing. The bone was hard enough and her wing gave way enough for the cut not to go very deep and cut right through her whole wing, but that came at a cost. Alexa heard the relatively fragile bone shatter, and she blacked out momentarily as indescribably pain shot through her.

When she woke up, she had crashed into the snow, her wing splayed out unnaturally to her side. And she could see the feet of her attacker just in front of her.

"You're not even worth finishing off," Edge said before turning and walking away, grabbing his bag off the ground on the way. "If you'd been more of a challenge in the first place, maybe you would have had the honor of fighting me all-out. But I don't even care if you think Edge isn't my real name; I don't waste my time listening to weaklings."

Pain still coursing through her, she got to her feet and looked at her limp wing, at the white of the bone that she could see even through the blood that was trickling out onto the similarly white snow. Then she looked back up at the receding figure, tears in her eyes.

It's not him. He would never… With an injury like this, will I ever be able to fly again? I know pokémon heal quickly, but…

"You're just leaving me here?" she called out, her voice high and cracking. Her wing - *Dear Arceus, the pain!* She'd always considered herself a tough person, at least as far as she could remember. But she could barely take this pain.

The scyther just kept on walking, sharpening his scythes against one another so that he'd be ready to face whatever unlucky soul next faced him.

It can't be him. It can't be the person I've been looking for. He would never do this.

He was getting farther away, and she was paralyzed where she was, unable to so much as adjust her position without sending more excruciating waves of pain through her tiny body.

Yet doubts nagged at her. The way he moved now, and even moreso the way he moved in battle - they weren't fighting styles like any she'd seen before among pokémon, except maybe with a few actual fighting types. The motions reminded her very, very specifically of how her friend had fought when he was a human.

But it cant' be him. It can't it can't it can't be-

"CECIL!" She couldn't help shouting out the name. She didn't even want it to be him anymore. Not if this was how he acted now. She'd even ignored all the reports of Edge killing other pokémon up until now, thinking they had to be mistaken if Edge really was the human she was looking for. She couldn't ignore those reports anymore.

And yet… Alexa had been staking all her hope on Edge being the person she knew for a while now, and now that she was broken and at a dead end, she still couldn't let that hope go.

The scyther froze for a few moments. He didn't turn around as he shouted back, "How do you know that name?"

Only now did tears come to her eyes. "Oh, dear Arceus, dear Reshiram and Zekrom above… It *is* him. No," she muttered to herself.

"How do you know that name?" he yelled it this time in anger as he rushed back towards her. "I haven't told that name to anyone here. No one at all."

Alexa didn't answer. This wasn't the person she'd known, and she was in pain. Between those two things, she couldn't find any words.

Almost enraged, Edge - or, rather, Cecil - held the tip of one of his scythes to her back and pushed her down, pinning her against the snow; she let out a short cry as the sudden movement jostled her wing.

"How'd you know?" Cecil shouted again, the tip of his scythe beginning to dig beneath the feathers, poking into the skin right between her wings.

"I was a human, too, all right?" she shouted out. She wanted the pain to go away, she wanted him to go away.

He let her go and looked at her dumbly for a moment. She glared back at him.

If I can never fly again…

"Can't you even make a guess?" Alexa asked. "Or do you not recognize me at all? Do you remember anything at all about being human? About who you were, and who you were friends were, about me?"

"How am I supposed to recognize you? Whoever you were, you're a pidgey now!" Edge was clearly frustrated, and angry, and confused. "I remember *everything*, and then it just stops, but I certainly don't remember speaking with any pidgey!"

It just… stops? So… He doesn't remember what I remember. He doesn't remember the last day. That's a relief. But she was still angry with him. "You are such an *idiot*, Cecil! It can't be that hard to narrow down who I must be!"

The idiot comment seemed to make things click. "Alexa?" he asked disbelievingly.

"Yes, you dummy! I'm Alexa!" she shouted.

For a few seconds, Cecil seemed completely unable to process this new information. Then, he quickly put his bag on the ground, opened it, pulled out a sitrus berry and laid it down right in front of Alexa. "That'll help with the pain," he said. "I know there aren't a lot of pokémon that live here, but I'll see if I can find someone who can help."

Alexa didn't say another word to him as he dashed off through the woods. She just nibbled at the sitrus berry, grateful for the slight dulling of the pain it gave, but also angry and relieved and sad and happy all at once.

I finally found Cecil, she thought. *But is he really the Cecil I knew?*

"Alexa, I'm… I'm sorry about your wing."

It had taken about a day, but Cecil had eventually found one of the few bug pokémon who had continued to tough it out in this forest even after the snow and ice had settled in permanently some years ago. With a stick and that weedle's silk, a crude but working splint had been made, and Alexa's wing bones put more or less back into their proper positions.

It still hurt like nothing else, though. And now that Alexa had gotten over the shock of finding Cecil - or, rather, finding how he acted now - she'd had more time to worry about her wing.

"It might not heal right," she said sulkily, not meeting Edge's eyes. "Do you have any idea how much I love flying? After I woke up here and realized how much fun it was, I didn't ever want to turn back into a human. If I can't fly again, then I'm not going to forgive you."

"I said I was sorry," Cecil said defensively. "And you're the one who challenged me to a battle in the first place."

"Yeah, well, sorry might not be good enough, mister," Alexa said. "At least take me to a guild or something, so I can get some proper treatment. I know you and the guilds aren't exactly on the best of terms right now-"

"I was going to the Northern Guild anyway," Cecil interrupted. "Might as well take you there with me."

Alexa scowled. "Really? Why're you going there?"

He didn't answer.

"Aw, come on. I may only remember a day of us as humans, but we're friends, right?" Alexa said, easily dropping her earlier anger. *After all, this is Cecil… Even if he's different, I don't want to stay angry at him.*

Cecil shrugged. "I battled Cobalion and Virizion and still beat them, more or less. I wanted to fight Reshiram, but he didn't show up. I want to keep on getting stronger, so I'm looking for more strong pokémon now. The guildmaster of the Northern Guild is my next best bet."

"That's why you're fighting everyone and anyone? 'Cuz you want to be stronger?" Alexa asked. "Okay, that I can understand. That's a lot like how I remember you. But you know, why be so cruel about it? Why even kill? That's not necessary, you know! Plenty of pokémon here get strong without resorting to that sort of violence, and that's not like the Cecil I remember!"

He grew sulky all of a sudden. "Let's just get moving," he said, extending one of his scythes so she could hop onto the dull upper part.

She did so, and hopped onto his shoulder when he raised her to there, but she didn't cease her questioning. "Don't try to avoid the subject!" she said as he started walking. "I looked everywhere for you since I woke up here, I think I at least deserve to know why you've been being a jerk to everyone! I'm not okay with hanging out with a murderer!"

"I'm not stopping you from hopping off and leaving," he retorted, becoming clearly devensive. "Go on ahead and leave if you don't like it."

"Hmph! Like I could really go anywhere with a broken wing that *you* gave me, jerk!" she answered. "Now come on and answer the question! Or, at least, tell me this - *should* I be afraid of you? Should I be treating you like someone who's going around killing pokémon for fun? 'Cuz if so, then I really will take my chances in the cold with a broken wing… And I'd really like to believe that you're not like that, because you were never, *ever* like that as a person. I'm almost sure of it."

Silence for a few moments. Then a sigh, and a reply. "I never tried to kill anyone. But when I fight, I fight all-out. I wasn't going to hold back to protect weaker pokémon who I don't even care about. I want to become as strong as I can be, and I can't do that if I'm never fighting to my fullest."

She stayed angry for a few seconds, but then let the issue drop. *I'm glad he's not killing on purpose, but… Disregarding life like that? I'm still not okay with it. Why is it that he's changed?*

"Well, since we're traveling together and all, why don't you tell me a little bit more about you and me? As humans, you know?" she suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"I only remember one day, after all, and you remember everything" Alexa said as she ruffled her feathers, trying to keep as much warmth as possible. Even though the glittering trees around them blocked most wind, it was still extremely cold. "I mean, I remember everything along with it - you know, it's not like I see the memory like an outsider, I still remember all my thoughts and feelings about you and everyone else I saw that day. But that's still not a lot."

Another pause in the flow of the conversation. That was much like how Alexa remembered Cecil the human - always taking time to think before he responded. That is, *when* he responded. He'd always been a man of few words.

"What day do you remember?"

She hesitated for the briefest moment, then said, "Some day during the summer before our junior year at college. Or, well, your guys' junior year. I was gonna be a sophomore, but I was your guys' age, so I don't know why that was, but whatever. Since we were all back home in Lacunosa - you know, you and me and Jordynn and Nathan and Andrew and Austin - we hung out some Saturday. Went to the mall, saw a movie. Normal stuff, nothing big." It wasn't a complete lie; they all had hung out the day that Alexa remembered, and they'd done those things. But then night had rolled around, and everything had gone downhill fast.

"Hmm… That's the last summer I remember before it just cuts off. Ends. And then I'm here."

Alexa laughed uncomfortably. "But I don't care about that day! I wanna hear about all the other days. So tell me about you, 'kay?"

"Not much to tell," he said. "Pretty average family. Mom and dad, and a few older siblings. I was kinda small, so I got bullied, so I took some martial arts classes. I really liked them, and people quit picking on me, so I kept it up. Got good. That was my one main hobby."

"'Cuz you liked beating people up, even then," Alexa commented.

"Just when they picked on me first, or were picking on someone else," Cecil defended.

Alexa pecked his head lightly. "Not. True. Don't you try to lie to me about stuff I should remember, because I won't forgive you for it! I remember that you'd pick fights with the bullies whenever you got the chance, once you were good enough to beat them."

"And how do you know that?"

"It happened on the day I remember. At the mall," Alexa said. "Some of those jerks were there, too, and you were just about to, well, 'invite' them out to the back alley so that you could settle things in the way you all preferred. Our friends stopped you… Gotta admit, I was egging you on to do it. I hated those jerks."

He glared at her for a moment. "Then why keep on getting on my case about it now?"

"Because back then, the only people you fought were the jerks who deserved it!" Alexa said. "Not innocent pokémon! It's completely different!"

"Hmph. Maybe, maybe not."

Silence again, and Alexa quickly regretted her outburst. "So… Your martial arts. It paid off here as a pokémon, didn't it?"

He smiled for the first time. "You noticed? Yeah, it did. I'm already a pokémon made for battle, not weak by any means… And for one-on-one battles especially, I just add in some stuff I learned as a human, and it works out the same. Took me a while to get it quite right, but once I did, it's something that other pokémon aren't used to fighting. Gives me an 'edge,' so to speak." He chuckled at his own joke.

Alexa rolled her eyes. *Typical of him to get all cheery and talkative when talking about fighting.* "And… Nothing else to say about yourself?"

"Not really," he said. "I was majoring in kinesiology. Was going to Johto University, where Nathan and Jordynn were, too. Didn't really care about it, though."

"Okay, then talk about me," Alexa prompted. "I know I was an only child, and I just had my dad, and I lived in Lacunosa all my life."

Cecil once again took his time before replying. Probably a good thing to do, this time; didn't want to offend her with some description, but also didn't want to lie to her. *And maybe there's more to it, if that last night was anything to go by. More reason he'd want to be careful not to offend me… But no, that was just that one time. I can't read too much into it; so much has changed since then.*

"I didn't know you that well until we all ended up in that same group of friends, around junior year of high school," Cecil eventually started. "You were friends with Andrew and Nathan, and I was friends with Austin… Somehow, we all just ended up hanging out. Sometimes. I wasn't as social as all of you. You were smart, but kinda lazy." He paused to see how Alexa would react, but she just sort of laughed, so he went on, "You were always sort of one of the guys. Played video games and stuff like that. You even took on the gym challenge for a while after high school - that's why you were a year behind us in college."

"Really? The gym challenge?" That particular fact about herself hadn't come up at all the day she remembered. "How'd I do?"

"Beat two gyms, then got lazy and quit," Cecil said with a slight grin. "Gave away most of your pokémon to more trusted trainers. Kept your herdier as a pet."

Alexa laughed. "Definitely seems like something I would do! So, anyway, keep going. What else?"

Cecil got a bit more awkward now. "What do you want me to say? I mean, you were always… Well, kinda loud. And you got in other people's business too often. You always meant well, but you were bossy."

She winced unconsciously. "That bad, huh? To you, too?"

"To everyone," he said. Then, seeing she was less than happy about this revelation, he added, "But it's not like people hated it! Some people did, I guess, but most people knew you meant well. And a lot of people appreciated it, because you'd get on people's cases and make them confront stuff that they didn't want to mess with or talk about even though they needed to."

This cheered her up some. "Were you one of those people?" Even if he said no, she knew the real answer. Though she couldn't remember any specific instances of it, he was exactly that sort of person to not talk about stuff he needed to talk about.

"Sometimes, I guess," Cecil said, before lapsing back into silence.

After a while just plodding along in quiet like that, Alexa finally worked up the courage to ask, "Do you want to go back? You know, to being a human?"

"No way," he said, for once without any hesitation. "It's like you said - even as a human, I liked fighting. It's even better now that I'm a pokémon. You just can't beat that rush, or the feeling of getting stronger and stronger. It's probably the same with you and flying, right?"

"Maybe it *was* the same," she muttered angrily, looking down at her wing.

Cecil immediately regretted making that comparison. "We'll get to the guild in four, five days tops at this speed, all right? And even if they don't exactly like me, you *are* a human. I don't hear much, but it sounds like the guilds are doing all they can to help us humans,

since they need us to wake up Reshiram and Zekrom. So they should help you."

"Speaking of the Nothern Guild… You should be heading more thataway," Alexa mentioned, pointing with her good wing more to the right. "We're heading too northward. Took me a while to tell for sure, since I'm used to being above everything. But I've flown up north a few times, even if I haven't been to the guild before. I know my way around."

"Could've told me earlier," Cecil grumbled as he changed course. However, as soon as he switched directions, he instead jerked his head up and to the side, nearly knocking Alexa off.

"Woah, there, what's up?" she said as she peeked around his head and followed his now stony gaze. At first she didn't see anything; it was only when the sneasel that was partially concealed among the tree branches dropped down to the ground that she realized what was wrong.

The sneasel just grinned and leaned against the tree trunk; Alexa noticed that she had a nevermeltice necklace around her neck. *Just like Vulpix, except this one looks like just a regular necklace…*

"Couldn't help overhearing… You two are humans?" the sneasel asked, a sly sort of look on her face, like that of a predator who's just outwitted its prey.

Alexa suddenly became acutely aware of how vulnerable she was with a broken wing, while Cecil answered defensively, "What of it?"

The sneasel shrugged and glanced to the side, in the direction that Alexa and Cecil had come from. Four more pokémon were fast approaching - a palpitoad, a drowzee, a machop, and a cubchoo. If they were with the sneasel, then no doubt they'd been hanging farther behind, unable to sneak around as quietly as the sneasel.

"Just curious," the sneasel said. "Name's Streya. I'm actually supposed to be meeting up with a friend of mine. You might know her. Vulpix? She's another human. Has a necklace a lot like this," Streya toyed with the ice with her long claws. "Haven't seen her around recently, have you?"

Alexa frowned, and tentatively offered, "She'd be at the Western Guild still, right?" But something was nagging at her memory. *I know I didn't talk with Vulpix much, but I didn't think she had many friends outside of her guild… And didn't she mention something about an ice-type? Something to do with that necklace of hers?*

"Nah, she'll have left there by now," Streya said. "I guess we're actually a bit too far north of the route she'll be taking, but I had to put together the right sort of team to meet her… All ice types might not've worked out too well, if we ran into any trouble."

Alexa felt Cecil tense beneath her, and she saw that the other four pokémon were beginning to circle around them.

The sneasel continued casually, "But you know, I think it's just as well. You see, we work for this guy called the Lord of Ice, and he's trying to recruit humans. It's a pretty good deal. He's really powerful, and definitely worth following. You guys want in?"

Alexa immediately saw interest spark in Cecil's eyes, and she promptly whacked him in the head with her good wing. She didn't have any more doubts that this sneasel was *not* the sort of pokémon she wanted to be around. For the both of them, she responded, "No way! He's that Kyurem guy, right? All he does is turn humans into zombies! And he's the one who gave Vulpix all the trouble she's been having, too!"

Streya frowned. "Well, that's too bad. Because as much as Kyurem wants us to focus on picking up Vulpix, I think it'd be better if we got him a three-for-one deal. So, you guys can come quietly, or we can rough you up a bit. Which do you prefer?"

"Don't you *dare*, Cecil," Alexa whispered when she saw the excited look on his face. "We need to get out of here, and fast."

"Go ahead and get down on the ground, Alexa," Cecil said out of the side of his mouth, his voice low enough to keep the pokémon around them from hearing. "I've got this."

She dug her talons into his shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere. Can you really fight them all off *and* keep me safe at the same time? Because that's what you'll have to do. I can't even fly out of range like I am now, nonetheless fight."

Streya and her gang continued to watch their prey patiently, waiting for them to make their decision.

Cecil looked indecisive all of a sudden, and Alexa continued, her voice barely audible, "We've gotta run."

"Fine," he said, obviously annoyed. He raised one of his scythes up. "Hop on, and hold on tight."

She did exactly that. Cecil lowered her down like that against his stomach, and before any of the five other pokémon could react, the scyther was zipping forward, flying over the head of the palpitoad with Alexa carried firmly but gently under him. The motion still made her wing hurt, but she clenched her beak and endured the pain.

"After them!" Streya shouted as she darted back into the treetops and began to give chase.

"Are we going to get away?" Alexa asked, unable to see behind them do to her position.

"From most of them, yes," he said as he continued to fly, only momentarily casting a glance back. "But that sneasel is fast. Once the others are out of sight, I'm going to set you down and fight her."

Alexa wanted to argue, but she bit back her words; they really didn't have a choice.

The flew on a few minutes, with Streya following behind them silently. Then, Cecil said as inconspicuously as possible, "The others are far behind. You ready?"

"Ready," Alexa said.

Cecil wasted no more time; he suddenly veered upward and landed on a thick tree branch overhead, and Alexa ignored the pain in her wing and jumped off. In another moment, Cecil had launched himself back in the opposite direction, straight at Streya.

The flurry of attacks that followed were nearly too fast for Alexa to follow - Streya was nearly as fast and as skilled with her claws as Cecil was with his scythes. Clang after clange were swallowed up by the silent, snow-covered forest as bony claw met hard metal. Cecil would go in with his greater range and strength, but Streya would parry and go in for his less defended stomach; he would jump back and swing again, sometimes managing to graze her, but she would jump back and fire an ice beam. Cecil, having no ranged attacks, would close in again to continue with the sort of combat he specialized in, and once again the exchange of blows would repeat.

But even to someone who knew as little about battles as Alexa, she was soon able to tell that it was Streya with her cold claw attacks and ice beams who had the upper hand.

"Cecil, we need to run again!" Alexa shouted down at him from her branch, frustrated that she both couldn't do anything, and even more frustrated that even if her wingwasn't broken, she still probably wouldn't be of much help.

Her shout drew both battlers' attention, even if just for a moment. And that moment was enough to give Streya a better idea than just straightforward battling. Rather than continue her fight, she jumped up to the closest branch and to the next branch after that, her eyes

trained on Alexa as she headed towards the more helpless opponent.

But she had misjudged how fast Cecil was. Though she had the head-start, he could fly as straight as he needed to, whereas she had to rely on where the branches were. Before Streya could reach her target, Cecil managed to cut deeply into the sneasel's leg, crippling her enough for him to continue right on past her, scoop Alexa up on the flats of his blades, and fly away.

The sudden rough treatment hurt thanks to her wing, but Alexa didn't complain. *Had Streya gotten to me… Well, at the very least, she and her friends would've gotten a hold of me, and I wouldn't have had a chance at escaping. I'm not sure what Cecil would've done then. Would he have given in if they promised not to hurt me? Would he have fought on even if they threatened my safety? Would he have abandoned me?*

… *I'm just glad we got away.*

"Is she following?" Alexa asked as soon as her heart stopped beating in her throat.

Cecil shook his head. "I got her pretty good. Thanks for the distraction, by the way."

"Happy to help, I suppose. Now, could we land for a moment so I can get my wing in a bit more comfortable a position?"

"Not yet," Cecil said. "Not until we're farther away. Just to be sure. Anyway… You know that Vulpix the sneasel was talking about?"

"Yeah. Met her just a couple days ago, I was looking for Cobalion with her. I was hoping I'd find you where Cobalion was," Alexa replied.

Cecil nodded. "I remember that vulpix. She was interfering with my battle with Cobalion… And she and that bulbasaur even beat me,

once before. Not a whole lot of pokémon have been able to do that."

"You know, we should go back. Warn her," Alexa said. "We'll all be worse off if that sneasel's group gets a hold of her, I think. Then she'll just be another zombie working for Kyurem, and who knows what'll happen if things keep escalating like this? And plus, what if we run into any more groups like that? I think we need the protection of the guilds, and the Western Guild is closest! You can apologize for what you've done, and they still might not like you, but I think they'll agree that it'd be better if neither of us ended up with Kyurem!"

Cecil gave it some thought, then said, "No. I've already decided. I'm going to the Northern Guild to challenge Abomasnow. You can stay there if you want, but I'll be leaving again - either by walking out victorious or escaping, if Abomasnow is too much for me to handle."

"But-"

"I'm not changing my mind," Cecil said before she could even start her argument.

Alexa shifted a bit, trying to make her position on Cecil's blades a bit more comfortable. "Fine. Be that way. But when we're both captured because we didn't turn around now and head back to the closest guild, I'm blaming you!"

The slightest of smiles crept onto Cecil's face. "I'm not going to let that happen."

Oh, hey, look. Alexa chapter out of nowhere! :) The chapters from this point on will still be more or less in the same order they've always been, but there will now be the occasional Alexa/Cecil chapter thrown in now.

… I have surprisingly little to say about this chapter. Oh well. Hope you liked it! Team Misfits (or what's left of it) is next!

Chapter 24: Team Misfits

Chapter Twenty-Four: Team Misfits

"Come *on*, Isola!" Lisa shouted at the doduo who sat huddled miserably in the corner of the room. "You can't just sit in our room all day! I've already taken a mission, so we're going!"

Isola shrunk into her corner more, away from Isola. "I'm sorry, but… I haven't been getting much sleep. I don't think I'd be of much use on a mission, even if I was in the mood for it."

This only made Lisa angrier. "You've moped for long enough! I'm as mad as a primeape about what happened to Cody, too, but we aren't gonna help him by sitting around here and crying about it, are we? The least we can do is practice up and train so that we're ready to fight him back to his stupid zigzagoon self when we see him! So get up and let's get going!"

Lisa took a few steps forward as if ready to drag the much larger pokémon along if she didn't comply. But Ryan - who'd stayed out of the argument up until this point - intervened, stepping between the two of them.

"You're going too far, Lisa," he said, for once completely serious. "Not everyone can deal with things like you, by just battling madly until you forget about stuff. Let Isola stay here. You and I can handle the mission ourselves."

"What, you're siding with her now?" Lisa asked. "You're both insane! He's just one zigzagoon, and he hasn't even been part of the team for that long! We can't just fall apart because he's gone!"

"We're not falling apart," Isola said. That was the last thing she wanted - losing the only other pokémon who had ever really

accepted her, despite her deformity and despite her flaws. "But I just… I don't think I can handle missions right now."

Lisa slapped her tail against the ground with as much force as she could muster, and the sound that resulted echoed back and forth against the stone walls. "And by 'right now,' what you really mean is 'while Cody isn't here,' right?" Again, to emphasize her mounting rage, she hit her tail against the ground; little chips of stone were sent splintering into the air. "That's the stupidest, most idiotic thing I've ever heard! This is just - stupid! I just - you know what? I don't even need you two idiots along. If you guys are going to be like this, then I don't even need a team, that stupid zigzagoon included! I'll do the mission myself, and you two can cry in a corner all day if you want to, because I don't even care anymore!"

"Wait!" Ryan said, but Lisa had already stormed out of the room.

The minccino sighed. "Isola, I-"

"I know," Isola said. "You need to go after her. Go ahead and go with her on the mission. I'll be fine here at the guild."

"You do know she's missing Cody just as much as you, right?" Ryan asked. "And just as much as me? We just… well, we're all dealing with it differently."

Isola nodded understandingly. "I know, I know… I promise, tomorrow I'll try to go on a mission. Would you tell her that?"

Ryan smiled. "Will do. Take care, now, okay?"

Isola smiled back. "Will do."

Ryan turned and left, 'accidentally' tickling her beak with his tail tip in the process. She sneezed; as always, his tail was just as dusty as the rest of his fur. Isola remembered that she'd been a bit repulsed by his absolute lack of cleanliness when she'd first met him, but now she'd been with him so long that she hardly even thought about it.

In fact, she'd been with both of them so long that she hardly thought about any of their flaws. Even now, while Isola herself was so distraught, she couldn't hold Lisa bossiness and lack of understanding against her. It was just how she was. Both Lisa and Ryan become more of a family to her than her birth flock ever had been.

She sighed. That sort of family dynamic was incomplete now, though. Missing. Going on missions without Cody along to complain, without the familiar addition of his weight on her back… It just wasn't the same. Nothing was the same.

And that feeling of something missing became a hundred times worse whenever she thought about the fact that he wasn't just gone, but taken and transformed. He wasn't the zigzagoon she knew anymore. Everyone had heard about what had happened to Max of the Southern Guild, how an icy linoone had tried to carry off both him and Terrakion's horn. Max was okay, at least, but that was the final confirmation. Cody was no longer the pokémon he once had been.

As if that wasn't bad enough, there was everything that had happened with Vulpix - that's what really had tipped the mood of the team this morning, causing the argument to escalate like it had. During the Solstice Games, Isola and Vulpix had talked quite a bit, and Ryan and even Lisa had been impressed with her talent for battle. Now Vulpix had run off with the Light Stone, attacking even her own partner in the process. It had happened last night, and news of it all had spread to the guilds via the abra quadruplets by the time this morning had rolled around. Lisa, Ryan, and Isola had all been quite depressed by the news.

Isola sighed once again, shaking her head quietly before lying it down against the floor. Everything seemed to be falling apart - her life, her friends, the very world she lived in. The other guild pokémon treat it all like nothing, like everything that was going wrong just another enemy to fight. But she knew that things were much more grim than any of them were willing or able to see.

"Oi, hey, anyone home?"

Isola wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting there when she heard the voice and looked up, only to see Deputy Swadloon in the entranceway of the room.

"Deputy Swadloon, do you, um, need something?" Isola asked.

Swadloon wrapped her leaf blankets a little more tightly around her as she came over and, much to Isola's surprise, jumped on her back. "You know, since you're away from your team for once in your life, figured I'd give doduo-back riding a try. Seemed fun, and it's better than 'se-waddling' around, right?" She grinned slightly at her own joke.

Isola simply looked at the deputy incredulously, not sure if she was being serious or not.

Deputy Swadloon's expression returned to its normal, unamused look. "Bad pun, I know. But seriously, thought we'd take a walk around. Chat or something stupid, so I can stop feeling guilty about knowing that you're probably just sitting up in your room. Then I can go on with my life. So giddyup!"

Still a bit bemused, Isola nonetheless got up and started wandering the halls of the rock-hewn guild, which were mostly empty due to the fact that most teams were out on missions during the middle of the day.

"So, I heard that argument earlier. You know, between you and that kangaskhan leader of yours," Swadloon started as they began their walk.

Isola didn't respond.

"Or, at least, I heard Kangaskhan's side of the argument. I think everyone still at the guild heard it. You know, I *hate* loud pokémon like that," Swadloon said. "Then again, I hate quiet pokémon, too.

And pretty much any other pokémon. Stupid pokémon, especially. Cody is kind of an idiot, isn't he? And whiny to boot."

Isola would've defended him and Lisa both, but she knew Swadloon better than to take her seriously. The deputy acted all pessimistic almost all the time, but everyone at the guild knew that she wasn't nearly so spiteful as she liked to come off. Even now, she spoke of her hates conversationally, without any of the resentment the words alone would have carried.

"Yeah, that zigzagoon is definitely an idiot," Swadloon continued. "Worse even than Elgyem, who shouldn't even be a guildmaster, you know? He's just so out there. Wouldn't even know how to manage a guild without my help. At least I get stuff done, even if I hate dealing with all the guildmembers. I'm really just a self-sacrificing sort of individual, now that I think about it."

A sudden, subdued but sincere chuckle escaped Isola's beak.

"Huh?" Swadloon said. "What's so funny?"

Isola glanced back at her passenger. And though she'd normally never insult a figure of authority in even the slightest way, she nonetheless said, "You whine nearly as much as Cody."

"I assure you that I do *not*," Swadloon immediately countered. "I complain, which is much more highly respected than whining. Cody just whines, and I swear that it's the most annoying thing in the world. Don't think I've heard a word come out of that zigzagoon's mouth that wasn't whining. Ridiculous, I tell you." She paused, then continued, "Even so, I feel bad about what's happened. Guilty. I knew it was a bad idea to send the humans out in search of the Warriors of Justice, no matter how much we need Reshiram and Zekrom. But did anyone listen to me? *Nooo.* It was just all the guild leaders and their limitless optimism. Well, phooey on them. They all need a good dose of common sense. If only Abomasnow had been there. *He's* got a good head on his shoulders."

Isola cast a quick glance backwards at her passenger, but quickly decided to bite back her question.

But Deputy Swadloon had seen that questioning glance. "You know, if there's one thing I hate more than anything, it's pokémon who won't say what's on their mind. Spit it out already."

Isola hesitated a moment, then asked, "The Northern Guild, and Guildmaster Abomasnow… Are they involved with all this? With what happened with Max, with the horn being stolen and-"

"-and with new ice-form Cody showing up?" Swadloon finished for her. "Hard to say. You know Fee the abra, who's been staying here a lot since the North's been getting colder? I trust her. She's pretty sensible, and I don't say that about a lot of pokémon. She was up there in the north when that whole situation went down, and Abomasnow sent out a message through her - said that it's true that he suspects a large presence of pokémon loyal to Kyurem in the region, but that he didn't give that Team FireFang any sort of mission like stealing Terrakion's horn. Said that he trusts them, though, so they must've been tricked somehow to take the horn and bring it to where new evil Cody would pick it up. Tricked even to get Max to come out there with them, so that the capture attempt could take place."

"And what do you believe?"

Swadloon once again tightened the leaves around her, as if warding off a chill. "I don't know what to believe anymore, with the world going insane. Abomasnow is strong of will and incredibly strong in battle. Short of Kyurem himself coming to Abomasnow and brainwashing him, I doubt he could've been overpowered without anyone hearing the cataclysmic battle that would've happened between him and whoever might've gotten him. So I tend to think he couldn't have been kidnapped and then brainwashed, like Emma and Cody. And he definitely wouldn't join something like Kyurem willingly. Ever. And since he's not acting like a zombie based on Fee's reports, I tend to think that he's gotta be telling the truth. But

might there be other traitors in the Northern Guild? Possibly. It's certainly the sort of place that would fit with Kyurem's whole theme of engulfing the world in ice or whatever it is that he's doing. I almost suspect Deputy Zoroark of being the cause of it all. You know, I hate pokémon like her. She treats everything like a joke, pranks everyone whenever she gets a chance. And *she* could pull off an Abomasnow illusion, and trick Team FireFang into doing what they did… But I don't know. Before all this happened, I wouldn't have suspected any of the guildmasters or deputies of ever doing anything to hurt the land or the pokémon in it… They're all such insufferable goody-goodies at heart. I hate pokémon like that."

"You mean pokémon like you?" Isola said, since that's exactly what Swadloon was. Sour on the surface, but kind when it came down to it. She wouldn't be wasting time talking to Isola if that wasn't the case.

The deputy let out a little huff of incredulity. "You give me way too much credit. I hate everyone through-and-through. Including stuffy little pokémon like you that sulk in their rooms all day. I could do that, too. Sorta in my nature as a swadloon - sit in some dark forest somewhere, and hate the world until I can evolve and be some nice motherly little leavanny. You know, with actual arms and legs - oh, dear Reshiram and Zekrom, not having arms and legs stinks so much. At least as a sewaddle I had legs. *Six* of them, though they weren't all that useful for much. Anyway, guess who's not evolving new arms and legs anytime soon? Me. Because the whole world's been screwed up on that matter for the last decade. But do I sulk about it? Well, yes, I do, but I don't let it get in my way. Mainly because Elgyem's such an idiot that this guild would fall apart if I dedicated all my time to sulking. So my point is, you can't just sit in your room all day. Deputy's orders, because I *hate* pokémon who sulk."

Isola didn't respond, but she knew Swadloon was right.

"Anyway, glad that's settled," Swadloon said despite Isola's lack of reply. "Of course, that's not to say that you can't hang around the

area of the guild. I'm sure you've heard, we've been bulking up security and whatnot because we're certain Kyurem will try to get the Dark Stone, and from what Keldeo and Terrakion say, it's here in the guild somewhere. Keldeo is staying here ready for battle, and Terrakion is traveling nonstop until he gets here, probably by sometime tomorrow morning. I'd bet Kyurem's gonna send the same pokémon he's been sending for the last few days to do his dirty work. Vulpix maybe, definitely Emma… And probably that idiot Cody, too. They'll be tough to beat, but I bet you'll want to be around when they show up, right?"

Isola smiled a bit. "I was sort of rationalizing staying here with that idea… But I was also just sulking."

Swadloon made a little grumbling noise. "You know, I hate pokémon that try and rationalize what they do. If you're gonna do something, just *do* it, that's what I say. Anyway, I'll be off," she said as she hopped off of Isola's back and started waddling back down the hallway they'd been walking through. "Hope my pessimism managed to brighten your day a bit."

"I think it did," Isola replied. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me!" Swadloon shouted back without turning around or stopping. "I hate pokémon who thank others for doing obviously right things. And for that matter…" Swadloon continued in more of a mumble to herself as she rounded a corner and went out of earshot.

Isola smiled for a moment, but any comfort that she'd received from the deputy's company quickly faded. She was alone in the stone hallway. A window next to her faced out towards land, towards Sprawling Shallows - the place where she, Lisa, and Ryan had found Cody that fateful day. The sight only made her more depressed.

She took a deep breath, then let it out. "If he comes to get the Dark Stone… No, *when* he comes to get the Dark Stone, I'll be ready. I have to be."

Isola was exhausted, but she still couldn't sleep that night. She might have gotten over her jumpiness for good, but the insomnia was another issue entirely. No matter how much she wanted to rest, no matter how much she tried to relax, she couldn't. Not with Cody gone.

She was tired of constantly adjusting and readjusting her position. It wasn't helping. Quietly, so that she wouldn't wake up Lisa and Ryan, she got up and left her room.

It was dark in the guild, even darker than it usually was at night; the sky was cloudy, so no starlight could come through the windows. There were torches placed periodically along the walls, but they were infrequent at best. Isola had to rely mostly on her memory to navigate the guild.

Eventually, she made it to one of the two walkways that sloped down to the mainland, traveling a bit more quickly now that her eyes were more adjusted and the walkway better lit. A number of pokémon watched her as she came down, all gathered around at the exit, guarding the guild. No doubt they were suspicious of anyone coming or leaving the guild at this time of night. They needed to be. Especially after what had happened with Vulpix, and the betrayal by Team FireFang, no one wanted to leave anything to chance.

But the dozen pokémon that were assigned to guard the entrance all knew Isola and, moreover, were quickly becoming familiar with her increasingly frequent nightly strolls.

"Trouble sleeping again?" one of them asked as they let her by.

"Yeah," she said. "Just need some fresh air, I guess. I'll be back in a bit."

That out of the way, she did the one thing she did best: she ran. Staying along the south side of Sprawling Shallows, where the sandy bank was smooth and even, she sprinted full-out in the near total darkness. It was the best way she knew to exhaust herself enough to

eventually get to sleep; she'd resorted to it occasionally even before Cody had come.

Now that he was gone, though, she didn't just keep it as a last resort. She relied on it in order to get to sleep.

And it wasn't just the exhaustion that made the running necessary. When she was so focused on going as far and as fast as she could, she stopped really thinking about things. Everything else fell into the background of her mind, and all she really thought about was the next step, and the next step, and the next step, one after the other after the other. After the constant worry of the day, such lack of thought was an immense relief.

After some time of sticking to running along the bank, she cut north, running straight through the shallow waters and cooling the heat of her feet. This was more difficult than running on land, of course, but her bird feet were also skinny enough that even the water did little to slow her down. She planned on doing as she normally did: make it over to the north bank, then follow it back to the guild.

But as she neared the north bank of the river, something didn't feel quite right. Her paranoia - gone since the incident at Mountain Warrens - returned, but in a more practical, somewhat more reasonable way. Some part of her knew that she wasn't suddenly scared for no reason. Something was out there in the darkness.

She quickly slowed herself and stopped, listening over the gentle flow of the current to anything that might be out of place and straining her eyes against the darkness. Her vision proved next to useless immediately; even after being outside in the dark for a while now, she could barely see anything except the vaguest of outlines of trees in the distance and sandbars around her.

Sound, however, was another matter. Though her hearing was by no means the best among pokémon, she could tell something was off. No matter how quiet they were trying to be, she could still hear what sounded like a large group of pokémon somewhere ahead, not far

from the bank of the river. Though not one of them spoke a word, there were the sounds that a pokémon can only do so much to cover up - the heavy breathing of large pokémon, the shuffling of the antsier pokémon. Footsteps as they all moved quickly but quietly, parallel to the river.

Isola didn't know who they were, or why they were here. But she figured that whoever they were, they're intentions weren't good.

She turned quietly, preparing to head back to the guild and warn them of the possible threat. But right as she turned, she saw something silvery in the darkness darting towards her.

Dropping all attempts at secrecy, she ran forward just in time, and the attacker splashed into the water where she had been standing. And as she continued to run, faster than before, that glimpse of her attacker clicked in her mind. The icy gleam of its fur, the relatively small body… The pokemon that had attacked her was a pokemon under Kyurem's control. And it wasn't just any pokémon. It was a linoone. Cody.

For the slightest moment, she considered turning around. What she would have done once facing him, she hadn't the slightest clue. Talk to him, battle him… Both would have been fruitless, and she knew it.

Even had she not known that, she soon heard the rumble of many pokémon getting to their feet, roused by a call of one of their own. No doubt they knew they'd been discovered, and so there was no further point in holding off their attack. Unless, of course, they managed to catch Isola before she could make it back to the guild. The sound of churning water and splashing filled the air as many of them charged into the water after her, trying to catch her.

But she didn't intend to allow that to happen. These were obviously a group of the pokémon rumored to follow Kyurem, and Isola didn't want to think what would happen to her if they caught her. And even more importantly, she knew she had to warn the guild. Even above

saving Cody, the safety of the guild and the safety of Zekrom came first.

She could hear them charging after her, but she was faster than all of them, and quickly pulled ahead. The only one able to keep up with her to any extent was Cody; she turned her head every now and then to see him following, murder in his eyes. Yet he didn't attack, no doubt knowing that any ranged attack he could manage would only draw the attention of the guild should it be seen or heard.

On solid ground, Isola didn't doubt Cody might've been able to catch her. She'd raced against linoone before, and she knew there were few pokémon that could beat them in a straight run. But here, in the shallows, she had the advantage. He could barely keep his head above the water in places, whereas the bulk of Isola's body was always well clear of the slow-moving current. If he could freeze the water to run on it just like Emma had done on multiple occasions, he avoided doing so now. This was probably due to stealth, Isola reasoned, or maybe he could run faster even now than he could manage to freeze a path.

She wanted to call out to him, to bring him to his senses. But she had little hope that such a desperate attempt would work, and so she saved every scrap of breath for running, pulling further and further ahead of the bulk of the small army that followed her. It wasn't until she felt that her legs would give way beneath her that she finally caught sight of the glow of torches at the guild's entranceways, and she spared enough breath to speak.

"Pokémon… Coming!" she yelled out between gasps for air. "Kyurem… Attack!"

She saw the pokémon scrabbling in the distant torchlight; either they had heard her, or one of them with better night vision had seen the herd of pokémon coming closer. For just a moment, she allowed herself a feeling of relief. The guild would be ready. Maybe they'd be able to protect the Dark Stone, wherever it was. Maybe they'd be able to capture Cody, or bring him to his senses. Maybe-

She wasn't expecting the ice beam that hit the water right in front of her, freezing it and causing her to trip and fall head-over-heels into the shallow waters.

Isola coughed and sputtered and frantically tried to get to her feet, but her legs were barely working after being pushed so far past their limit. She braced herself for the attack she felt was sure to come next, but it didn't come. Cody raced right past her, ignoring her completely, followed soon by the frontrunners of the attacking group.

After that, the bulk of the group came; and though none stopped to fight Isola, the trample of their feet did just as much damage, hitting her over and over again and knocking her down beneath the surface. She curled in on herself as best she could, trying to protect the long bones of her legs and her much more fragile neck. But even that did next to nothing to protect her from the onslaught. At one point, after she'd felt like the charge had been coming forever and that at any moment she'd be killed outright by a misstep of some pokémon, a hoof made contact with her head, and she blacked out momentarily.

When she was next aware, the crowd was gone and she was coughing up water, finding it difficult to so much as hold her head up. Her entire body was shaking from the cold of being soaked and the pain of all the bruises that she could feel across her body. Her head hurt, her legs felt useless, and for a moment she struggled to even remember what had happened.

Then she caught sight of one pokémon running alongside the edge of the river, far behind the rest of the group, her crystalline antlers and icy fur glinting mutely in the darkness.

"Emma," she said to herself, at first not quite comprehending the sight.

She suddenly remembered that she'd seen Cody, too, ahead of the rest of the attacking group. Except that linoone hadn't been Cody. Not really. The linoone she'd seen had been so different that she

could barely even believe that the real Cody was in there at all, hiding beneath the murderous glare and the emotionless face.

"But he's gotta be there… Deep down."

With some effort, she forced herself back on her feet and moved forward, at a cautious but fast trot, towards the flashes of attacks and sounds of battle that were taking place right outside the guild. Her eyes sought frantically for any sign of Cody as she got nearer and nearer.

But all she saw was chaos. There was no rhyme or reason behind the battling; it seemed only as if each pokémon was looking for the nearest enemy and attacking blindly, without much thought as to how best to attack when both friend and foe alike were in such tight quarters. Bolts of lightning shot of in one direction, embers in another, jets of water in yet another. One surf attack raised the waters of the river, sweeping away a huge section of the battlers, regardless of their alliance.

Only a few sure points of calm and certainty could be seen amongst the fray. On one side of the battle, there was Keldeo, striking with pinpoint accuracy against only those who were not of the Eastern Guild, usually knocking them out with a single strike of his horn or hoof. Then there was Guildmaster Elgyem and Deputy Swadloon, who were cutting through enemies and combining their attacks with more skill and teamwork than any team Isola had ever seen. Elsewhere in the battle - though drifting inevitably closer to Keldeo with each passing moment - was a pokémon who changed form every few seconds, sewing confusion among her enemies as she struck out again and again. Her brain still fuzzy from the earlier injuries she'd sustained, Isola wasn't able to identify that pokémon until she finally returned to her own form for just a few seconds.

"That's… That's Deputy Zoroark!" Isola said to herself as she picked up her pace, her brain sluggishly trying to process what this meant. And the pokémon around Zoroark, too - Isola realized that she recognized many of them. All were Northern Guild members.

But for the moment, Isola didn't care about that. She cared about finding Cody. But neither he nor Emma were anywhere to be seen in the battle. She raised her head as high as she could manage, glancing to the edges of the battle and beyond, looking and looking for any hint as to where they went.

She was about to head into the guild itself, assuming that Cody had gotten in, when she saw something glinting in the darkness with a different, more solid sort of light than the shimmering of the waves that surrounded the guild. It was still too dark to know for sure, yet she felt certain that there was only one thing it could be: a quickly growing bridge of ice, reaching nearer and nearer to the central hub of the guild with each passing moment.

Without another thought, Isola dashed through the fringes of the battle, desperation goading her tired legs back to full mobility. A couple pokémon turned to come after her as she ran, and a flamethrower grazed her back, searing her feathers. But she ran on, easily outpacing her pursuers until other Eastern Guild pokémon distracted them. As far as Isola could tell, she was the only one who had seen Cody and Emma; everyone else - including Keldeo, the Guildmaster, and Deputy Swadloon - was too absorbed in the battle to see them in the distance.

It was only when Isola escaped the chaos of the battle and had taken her first steps out onto the bridge of ice that she shouted out, "Cody! Cody, it's me, Isola!"

He didn't so much as turn to see who was shouting his name. Isola had expected as much and kept on running. At the very least, maybe she could distract him and Emma, keep them from whatever they were doing, keep them from-

Isola was blinded as two objects that seemed attached to Emma's side began to glow, and the whole area began to rumble with some unknown force. She heard the ice beneath her cracking along its flaws, and she bent down lower and widened her stance to keep from being thrown off into the deep waters that surrounded the guild.

But she wouldn't abandon Cody. She moved forward as quickly as she could manage, even as she saw another light appear, this one at the very top of the central pillar of the guild that towered right in front of Cody and Emma. The sphere of light floated downwards, soaring quickly through the air towards the two ice-imbued pokémon.

"The Dark Stone…" Isola whispered to herself. She could still hear sounds of battle continuing behind her, but she had no doubt that all knew what was going on. There wasn't much time now. Disregarding her own safety, she ran forward, thinking that maybe if she grabbed the Dark Stone before it reached the other two, then maybe-

She got close, but not close enough. It floated straight to Emma, who touched it lightly with her nose. Any hopes for salvaging the situation vanished at once as the stone grew brighter than ever, seemingly absorbing into itself whatever it could manage - air, water, shards of rock, fragments of ice, and even what little light that there was on this dark night. The suddenness of the force nearly knocked Isola from her feet, and she had to dig into the ice to keep herself from being pulled towards it as well.

And then the stone was gone, replaced by a hulking figure that hovered just above the water, its electricity-filled tail the only way to see it in the blackness of the night. For a moment, all sound ceased, the chaotic battle paused, and everyone looked to the two pinpricks of the creature's red eyes.

"The hero… *My* hero, has finally come," Zekrom said, her voice low and loud, yet definitely feminine. She turned her eyes to Emma and, lowering one of her massive hands to the sawsbuck's level, said, "You are the one who has awoken me, correct?"

"Zekrom, run away! It's Kyurem's trap!" Keldeo shouted out from amongst the crowd, pushing forward through the crush of pokémon and breaking the otherwise awed silence of the onlookers.

Zekrom's eyes widened as she looked back down at Emma and finally saw that all was not as it should be. But by then, it was too

late for her to withdraw her hand. Emma leapt onto the giant's outstretched hand, and the moment she made contact, tendrils of glowing ice lanced outward from her, flawing Zekrom's armor-like body like thousands upon thousands of tiny cracks.

Zekrom let out an earsplitting roar as she lashed out, kicking at the ocean, her tail cracking against the guild itself, her arms hitting out against the bridge of ice and shattering the entire bridge, sending both Cody and Isola tumbling into the water.

Though Isola was able to float, she was tossed beneath the water again and again as the waves caused by Zekrom's thrashing crashed into her, carrying chunks of sharp ice that had broken. She choked as water entered her lungs, unintentionally gasping whenever ice slammed into her body. In the torrent that surrounded her, she caught only brief glimpses of what else was going on.

There was Zekrom, flying off erratically, her blue tail getting smaller and smaller as she left, the light flaring more dimly with each passing moment. Another wave engulfed Isola, one chunk of ice hit her in the head, aggravating the trauma she'd already received and causing stars to dance before her eyes. She thought she saw the two groups of battling pokémon stopping, confused looks on their faces - another wave, more darkness in Isola's vision. More commotion the next time her head breached the surface, but she caught only the briefest glimpse this time; even without the waves, she was barely able to hold her head up above the water any longer. She drifted in and out of consciousness for some time, only ever waking up for long enough to lift her nodding head back out of the waves.

The next thing she really knew, she was draped across Keldeo's back as he walked across the water and back to shore, not even struggling under her weight despite the fact that he was barely any larger than Isola herself.

Isola was still confused, still battered by everything that had happened, ashamed that she'd managed to do next to nothing to help despite her best efforts. "Zekrom?" she asked, her voice weak.

"Gone, presumably with Emma still with her," Keldeo said, his voice seeming older that it had been, filled with worry. "We don't know what will happen with the two of them."

"And… Cody?"

"Terrakion arrived just in time - he caught Cody as he was slinking off around the side of the battle," Keldeo said, a bit more happy to be giving somewhat better news. "Cody's still… you know, not himself. But we'll think of something to make him better, okay? Until then, you need to rest. We wouldn't have even been ready for the attack if not for you, so I think you deserve a good rest."

She let out a weak cough. "But it didn't help. I didn't do-"

"HEY! ISOLA! You're not allowed to EVER go off by yourself EVER again, got that!"

Isola lifted her head for the first time as they neared the shore, and saw in the dimness of dawn Lisa and Ryan waiting for her.

"When they heard that you'd been the one to alert the guild, but saw that you were nowhere to be seen, they're the ones who figured we needed to look for you," Keldeo said. "And when they heard that Cody had come out of the ocean… Well, Ryan figured to ask me to go look for you, in case you'd been near him when he ended up in the water. Good thing, too - you were drifting pretty far away from the guild by the time I found you. You've got yourself some good friends looking after you."

She smiled a bit. "I know." The world was worse off than ever, and yet… Cody was back, physically if not mentally. That was progress enough for her. She wasn't sure how, but she'd figure out some way to get the real Cody back.

For now, though, she was exhausted. Not too long ago, she hadn't been able sleep a wink. But almost as soon as Keldeo set her down on the ground and Lisa and Ryan started talking to her, she couldn't

possibly keep her eyes open another moment. She laid her head down on the ground without so much as a hello to her team, and she drifted off into unconsciousness.

Well, blargh. Not sure how that chapter turned out - the action flowed a lot more differently than I usually write, due to the fact that during that second half Isola was almost solely an observer. It's probably fine, me being paranoid again or whatever. Anyway, what really matters is that ZEKROM IS AWAKE AND EMMA IS THE ONE WHO WOKE HER. O_O What will happen next! And what's up with the Northern Guild?

Next chapter, my friends. Next chapter. Some of it might be explained. :)

Chapter 25: Max

Chapter Twenty-Five: Max

"Come on, everyone, quiet down already!" Guildmaster Braviary shouted, his loud voice rising over the noisy din of all the guild pokémon gathered. Everyone immediately quieted down, though Max and his friends hadn't much needed the admonition. He and Zeke, Kara, and Team FireFang were all quiet as they stood at the side of the room, rather isolated despite the crowd.

By now, Max was only too used to these early morning assemblies. The Guildmasters only called them if something else had happened in the region. Yesterday, it had been the announcement of Vulpix's betrayal. That news had only further distanced many pokémon from Max, despite the fact that few pokémon believed him to be actually evil ever since Cody had tried to take him away.

But now… Oh, what might have happened now? I almost want to just run back to my room now and pretend nothing is going on… But that's just running away again.

Guildmaster Braviary cleared his throat in the now nearly silent room, and began his announcement in a rather downcast tone. "Well, I'm sorry to say that Zekrom has been awoken by Emma, and that we know the fate of neither of them at the moment."

Everyone at once burst into heated discussion, and more than a few glances were cast back in Max's direction. Max hid himself a bit further in the mane of hair on Zeke's head, where he was currently perched.

"Don't let 'em get to you," Zeke said as he felt Max's discomfort. "Everyone's scared and perhaps a bit more suspicious than usual. For good reason, too. But only a couple of the stupidest ones blame you for it, especially since you've got the Guildmasters' support."

At the front of the room, Guildmaster Mandibuzz opened her wings and sent out such a gust of air that everyone knew she meant business, causing them all to quiet down just as quickly as they had for Braviary's call to order. With the room once again quiet, Mandibuzz continued speaking in Braviary's place. "There's more bad news, but also some good news. The bad news is that it seems almost certain that Guildmaster Abomasnow is in league with Kyurem, as are a number of mostly new recruits to the Northern Guild." Everyone began to talk again, but Mandibuzz raised her voice over them before it could get too loud and continued, "Abomasnow sent his deputy, Zoroark, and all of his older, still upright guildmembers to attack the Eastern Guild in the middle of the night. Zoroark and the ones who followed her all had been told that the Eastern Guild was planning on using Zekrom to their own gain, and quite justly wanted to prevent this. Unbeknownst even to Zoroark was the fact that Cody and Emma under Kyurem's control were following her group, waiting for the chance when the guild was most distracted to strike. That is how Zekrom was awoken.

"Guildmaster Abomasnow has ceased communications with us, so he cannot defend himself - not as if we would believe him. He even attacked Fee last night, and she saw that with her own eyes, metaphorically speaking. She just barely teleported away with her life. With that in mind and all the testimony of Deputy Zoroark and those who were with her, we have little doubt where Abomasnow's loyalties currently lie, and we likewise have little doubt that the attack on the Eastern Guild served two purposes. One was as cover so that Zekrom could be awoken. The other was to get Zoroark and all those who might interfere with Abomasnow's evil plans out of his guild. On both fronts, Abomasnow was successful."

"But like she said, there's good news, too!" Braviary shouted out, yet again having to do so before the commotion got too loud to be managed. "Cody the human was captured and is currently being held at the Eastern Guild until he comes to his senses! And, moreover, we now have the cooperation Deputy Zoroark and all the good pokémon who were with her last night. Pretty good news, huh?

We're not sure what we're going to do about Zekrom and Abomasnow yet, because there's a lot still up in the air, but we're the Southern Guild! We'll be ready for whatever the world throws at us, and we'll get things back to normal! Right everyone?"

A cheer rose up; as usual, Braviary's almost obnoxious confidence was infective.

Kara let out an annoyed little huff from her position on the branch-woven wall. "Everyone in the guild is way too optimistic. Surely we don't have a chance if Zekrom's on Kyurem's side now."

"But we don't know that for sure yet," Kuro offered. "Zekrom *is* Zekrom, after all. Even if Emma was the one to wake her up, there's probably a good chance she could fight Kyurem's influence. And Reshiram's still out there, probably. If he's stuck in the Light Stone, maybe Kyurem can't get to him even if Vulpix manages to get the stone to him. All the more reason why you ought to stay safe here, Max! You could still be the hero Reshiram needs."

"Yeah, we'll make sure nothing happens to you!" Aiden said, wagging his tail energetically. "Especially after we nearly got you caught, we've got to make it up to you!"

Max scratched his ruff of neck feathers embarrassedly. "There's no need for that, guys. It wasn't your fault - you heard what the Guildmasters just said. There was no way you could've known that Guildmaster Abomasnow wasn't working for the good of everyone anymore. And besides, it won't matter even if I *am* captured. I already know I'm not the hero Reshiram needs."

"Who knows?" Zeke said. "I mean, Reshiram and Zekrom are pretty darn mysterious. Maybe their definition of a hero is different from what you think."

"Not if Emma is the other hero," Max said, sounding rather worn and uninterested. He wasn't particularly off put by the thought of him not being hero; he was just still upset with the suspicion surrounding

him, the feeling of everyone not quite wanting to be around him anymore. The four pokémon with him now seemed to be the only constant exceptions. "I mean, she was strong, smart, and she stood up for what was right even when she had absolutely no stake in it. That's a hero. Me… Well, not so much."

Zeke shrugged and started following the flow of the crowd back out of the guild's main meeting space. "I still wouldn't count you out. We already know that Emma, Vulpix, and that Edge guy can't be the hero for Reshiram. There's only you and that pidgey and that zigzagoon left. And neither of them seem like quite the heroic type, either. Maybe you're like a metapod - just waiting for your chance to burst out and become your true heroic self."

"Don't hold your breath waiting for that to happen," Kara grumbled as she walked alongside the much larger Luxray.

Zeke was used to her critical comments by now, and even Kuro and Aiden had stopped trying to defend Max from them, seeing as he rarely took offense. All or them brushed it off, and Zeke moved on to a new topic. "Well, since we're all apparently choosing to play bodyguard for Max and stick at the guild as usual, what shall we do? Anyone up for some training?"

"Actually, I'm gonna go back to sleep," Max said, hopping off of Zeke's back. "I didn't sleep too well last night… And being woken up bright and early for a guild meeting didn't help. You guys go ahead an train, if you want; I'll find you when I wake up."

"Suit yourself," Kara said as she continued down the hallway without a second glance.

Zeke looked at Max more closely, though, his gaze questioning. Max usually wasn't one to sleep in late on a normal day.

He probably still thinks I'm sulking about everyone in the guild still not acting normal around me… Which is kind of true, I suppose.

There's that, and there's plenty more that makes sleeping just seem like a better idea.

"Well, all right," Zeke eventually said. "Team FireFang, you two going to join Kara and I?"

"Sounds like a plan," Kuro said, though she too seemed to be wary of Max's real motivation for choosing sleep over training or socializing. "Best of luck catching up on your sleep, Max."

Almost as soon as they went their separate ways, he could no longer hold back the yawn that had been building, and he realized that he really was quite a bit more tired than he'd thought.

I honestly didn't sleep well last night. Nightmares or something. Probably dreaming of Cody catching me again, or of abandoning my sis, or… Well, too many things to list, really.

It wasn't long before he was in his room once again. And he'd barely settled into his little next of leaves before he was sound asleep.

I can give you the power you want.

Max awoke with a start some time later, those words echoing through his mind, the feel of them cold against the inside of his skull. The leaves of his nest were scattered about, and he could feel his heart racing, and dread filling him; his rest had certainly been less than restful.

I can give you the power you want. The power to not be afraid anymore.

He wasn't sure if that second bit had actually been said, or if it had just been part of the feel of the nightmare. It had definitely been implied. The power to stand up for himself. The strength to stand up for others. The force of will to be brave.

A chill went through him, and he quickly nestled further into his leaves and ruffled his feathers to be rid of it. The Summer Solstice had barely ended. He shouldn't be cold this time of year, and yet the cold he felt was undeniable.

The power you want.

A flash of the dream came back to him, with a reality that made him think it was more than just a dream. Some pokémon that Max had never seen before was speaking to him, but it was speaking to the old Max, the human Max. It felt almost like a memory, yet he knew that was stupid. The pokémon didn't look familiar, and he knew for certain that pokémon couldn't talk to humans. And yet…

Power.

Another chill, this time mixed with realization. Whether it had been a memory or really a dream, there was something more to it that that. He'd heard the accounts of Vulpix's trial before Guildmaster Emolga and two of the Warriors of Justice. She'd said she'd had nightmares, that she'd felt some other presence trying to control her.

Surely that's not happening to me, too? I don't have that collar of hers or anything like that. I haven't heard any voices up until now. But it's too much of a coincidence. And it doesn't feel like just something my brain thought up in a nightmare.

I can give you the power you want.

Those words… He couldn't lie to himself. They were appealing. He wanted nothing more than to be powerful enough to conquer his own cowardice.

I wonder if it would help? A little more power, a little more strength. Maybe then I wouldn't run away. I wouldn't need to. I could just…

Coldness grew in the pit of his stomach as he thought about what he'd been considering.

This is Kyurem I'm talking about - Kyurem! I can't believe I was even vaguely considering taking any power from him! Sure, I'd be more powerful, but I'd be like Emma and Cody are now, and I don't want that just so that I'd stop being afraid!

"This is the problem with me!" he suddenly shouted out, his tail unconsciously whipping back and forth as his agitation grew. In a somewhat lower voice, he said to himself, "That's the problem. I keep on relying on others. To give me power, to take on stuff I don't want to deal with. I only helped fight Emma because I knew the others would help, and I didn't try to stall Cody when he took Terrakion's horn because Guildmaster Mandibuzz was so close, and now I'm even listening to voices in my head because I think getting free power will somehow help…"

"Well, that last one is pretty stupid, but I don't see all that much of a problem with the other two."

Max looked up, surprised to see Zeke standing in the doorway. "Zeke? Weren't you training?"

"You've been sleeping for a while," Zeke answered, his voice a neutral tone as if he was testing the waters, trying to see what mood Max was in. "I needed a break, so I came up to see if you were awake yet. Wasn't exactly expecting you to be spouting nonsense, though."

Max awkwardly rubbed the feathers on one of his wings, systematically ruffling them and then smoothing them to their natural positions. "I was just having some weird dreams," he said, not wanting to worry Zeke and hoping that he hadn't heard much of his little monologue. "It's no big deal."

"Voices talking in your head tends to be a big deal," Zeke said. "You really want to be stronger that badly? If so, then just come down and train with us. That's the best way to do it."

"Yeah, that sounds like a plan," Max said with a smile. Even in times like these, he didn't like to dwell on worries. Much better to hang out or, in this case, train with friends.

Zeke brightened as he turned and headed out the door, Max following behind. "Well, let's go, then," Zeke said. "Oh, and you sure you don't want to talk about the dream or nothing? 'Cuz let me say right off that friends are around for you to rely on. Now, admittedly, you could probably work a bit on taking a stand by yourself, but I know you already are working on it."

"But that's the thing. I keep on saying that I'm trying to be braver, but I don't think I really am," Max said, still more or less cheerful just because he was talking to someone about it rather than just sulking. "I still end up just waiting for other pokémon to help me out, for someone else to do what I'm too scared to."

Zeke looked down at Max. "Well, I don't know what to say about that. You've just gotta, you know, do it. Take that leap. Be courageous. Realize that sometimes, there are things even more important than your own safety."

Max rolled his eyes. "It sounds so simple when you just say it like that, but when I'm faced with that stuff, nothing seems more important than me. I don't want it to be like that, but that's the truth. Sometimes I really do wonder that if I was just stronger, then I wouldn't even need to worry about it, because I wouldn't be scared of anything."

"That's sorta dodging the issue though," Zeke commented, his tail flicking back and forth. "If you're just not scared anymore, then that doesn't make you courageous. And since there will always be someone stronger, you've just got to learn how to stand up until the very end."

There was a moment's pause as Max took this in. Then, however, he took the chance to ask something that'd been on his mind more and more lately. "Do you hate how much of a coward I am? You were

pretty upset about it at first when we went to Sheltered Vale that time, when you saw firsthand that I wasn't all that you'd heard I was."

"That was then," Zeke said, smiling to show he didn't mind. "We're friends, right? So I can overlook it, just like how I hope you overlook how much of a jerk I was back then."

I hardly even blame him for that. I deserved it, anyway, probably. And even if not, he doesn't act like that now. That's all that matters.

"Of course, doesn't stop me from trying to get you to be braver," he continued. "In fact… You know, I've been thinking. Maybe if you battled differently, it'd help change your mindset about stuff. Make you a bit bolder, you know?"

"What do you mean?" Max asked.

"Well, you tend to rely on ancientpower and dragonbreath a lot. Ranged attacks, though ancientpower's got a lot shorter range, but still. You only ever use wing attack or quick attack or anything like that only if your opponent gets close, or you've got a type advantage. You try to keep your distance. Almost like you're always ready to run away."

Max thought about it. "I guess that's kind of true," he admitted. "Although I even do that when I'm just training, when I know I won't have to run away."

"Exactly my point. Whether you do that because you're scared or it's just your preferred style of battling, it's still a habit," Zeke said. "What if you could change that? Why don't you try it today, while we're training. Stick more to physical, contact attacks. Heck, maybe you could even try to ramp things up a bit. I'd be willing to bet that if you can learn dragonbreath, then those talons of yours would let you learn dragon claw, too. That'd pack quite the punch, and you strike me as a pokémon that'd be better at physical attacking anyway."

Max looked down at his talons; he'd never really used them for much other than walking. But it was true that they were sharp, and his legs were by nature stronger than his wings. *And I feel like maybe Zeke is right about close combat. Maybe if I put myself at risk more, I won't run whenever things go south. And even more than that, any dragon attack might help. Even though I can manage dragonbreath now, I still don't feel up to that feeling of… of majesty, of power that I fake in order to make it work. Maybe the more I use it, the more I'll believe it.*

"I haven't a clue how to make dragon claw happen without someone coaching," Max eventually said, "But I can sure give it a try. Can't be too different from dragonbreath, right?"

It was either very late in the night or extremely early in the morning when Max finally stopped trying to sleep. By all logic, he should've slept like a baby. With a lack of much else better to do at the guild, he, Zeke, Kara, and Team FireFang had trained practically all day. And with the dreams from the previous night still on his mind, he'd trained even harder than he usually did, wanting to become stronger through his own efforts. Zeke's advise to try more direct contact combat made him sorer than ever, due both to his own much more physically tiring attacks and to the much greater number of attacks he had been on the receiving end of.

Not to mention, dragon claw was proving to be more of a hassle than he'd first expected. He could barely keep his balance while trying to use one of his talons to attack. After a lot of trial-and-error, he'd eventually figured out how to make his claws glow with the same purplish energy that made up his dragonbreath attack, but he could only manage it briefly without it dissipating or hurting himself. So far, his attempts at dragon claw were nothing more than a glorified scratch attack.

Ineffective or not, his efforts had left him sore and exhausted. Yet still he couldn't sleep that night, at least not well. The same chill had

returned, and the same voice from before echoed through his dreams promising him power and strength.

Now, in the dead of night, the voice scared him. He was afraid of what it could do. *If this same thing happened to Vulpix, then who's to say I won't try to escape my guild just like she did? Who's to say I won't hurt someone else in the process? Maybe… maybe I should leave the guild now, before that can happen.*

And I feel like… the more I stay here, the more I doom myself to be a coward.

He'd had that feeling for some time now, mixed with a sense of uselessness. What was he doing here at the guild? Nothing. Not now. Ever since the Four Warriors had been found, the Guildmasters had insisted he stay safely in the general vicinity of the guild and not go out on missions. All he was doing was training, but for what? So that he could keep on hiding here? Relying on everyone else to protect him?

Coward though he knew he was, that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to be doing something. He wasn't content to sit around at the guild any longer, especially when he couldn't so much as keep up a normal conversation with many of the other guildmembers.

Maybe… Maybe I can prove to all of them that I'm not just a burden, not just a liability who could be turned to Kyurem's side at any time. Maybe if I go out and do… Well, just do something, just get out of here, maybe then I can stop relying on everyone else to take care of me. I was terrified when Landorus was chasing me during the Solstice Games and there was no help to be seen, and yet that's the only time I've really been able to turn around and fight, to stop myself from running.

That particular thought struck him now more than ever, and a new resolution flooded through him, chasing out the cold. "If I don't have anyone around to help me, then I'll have to rely on my own strength, just like back then. That's it. That's exactly the solution I've been

looking for," he whispered to himself. "If I leave the guild by myself and face the world on my own, then maybe I'll finally be the sort of person I've been trying to be for the longest time." Determined in this new idea, he got to his feet and left his room, walking only a few more rooms down the hallways until he came to Zeke's room.

For nearly a minute, Max just stood there in the doorway watching the sleeping luxray, trying to decide whether to wake him and tell him his plan or not. *He might make a big deal about it… Sometimes, I don't even know how he'll react to stuff. Will he be overprotective and insist I stay here? Or support my wanting to leave?*

But Max knew he couldn't leave without telling anyone, or else everyone might see that he'd disappeared and take it as proof that he'd defected to Kyurem's side, either willingly or not.

I could wait until morning to tell him, then leave tomorrow night… But I'll probably lose my nerve by then. And he literally couldn't leave a note to tell everyone that he was leaving for his own reasons. After all, the only thing anyone wrote in was footprint runes, a script that Max hadn't bothered to learn at all in the time since becoming a pokémon.

"Hey, Zeke, wake up a moment," Max said as he finally walked up to the sleeping luxray and shook him a bit.

"Huh? What is it?" Zeke asked, his words slurred sleepily as he rolled onto his stomach and looked up blearily at Max. "What do you want?"

"Are you really awake?" Max asked. "I have to tell you something important, and I don't want you to forget it by morning."

Zeke sat up a bit and rubbed at his eyes with a paw. "Yeah, I'm awake, though I'd rather not be. What is it, Max?"

"I'm going to leave the guild. Go off on my own for a while," Max said, sort of blurting it out in order to get his plan out of the way. "I

think I'm going to go to the Eastern Guild first and figure out if I can help Cody at all, since we humans seem to be the only ones that can break Kyurem's hold on others. And after that… Well, I think I'm going to go North. Maybe I can find Vulpix and stop her, if she hasn't reached Kyurem yet. And if not, I can try and do some investigating for myself, figure out what all is going on. After all, Zekrom might still be out there somewhere, if Kyurem wasn't able to control her."

Zeke just stared at Max for a few seconds, blinking sleepily. Then, the slightest hint of a smile came to his face, just barely visible by the starlight that came through his window. "About time," Zeke said as he laid back down, resting his head on his paws and closing his eyes. "I figured that you'd eventually head out if you were serious about this whole not being a coward thing. Don't suppose you'll let me come along?"

Max shook his head. "No way. Going alone is the whole point."

"Well, we'll see about that," Zeke said.

"What do you mean by that? Zeke? Zeke?" Max tried nudging the luxray again, but either Zeke was completely asleep again or he was faking it so as to not answer the question.

Max sighed. *Well, guess I won't know what he meant until I see him again… which might not be for a while.* The thought of not seeing him or any other of the guild pokémon here disappointed Max to no end, but it didn't damage his resolve. *Nothing else for it. Guess I'll get going.*

He hopped up to the window and, after casting one last glance back at his seemingly asleep friend, he opened his wings and jumped, gliding down from high up in one of the guild's four massive trees, carefully catching the wind.

Even since learning those flying tips from Alexa, he had never tried gliding down from somewhere this high. But tonight, he was taking a leap of faith, and for once betting on the fact that he could be bold

enough to do what he set his mind on. Tonight was a night of firsts. His first time not relying on others, his first time really believing in himself, his first time trying a flight like this.

And the feeling of gliding through the night sky was worth taking that leap of faith. The sensation of the summer night's air sliding past his feathers and around his beak was nothing short of marvelous, even if he knew it could only last so long.

When he saw the ground getting closer at an extremely fast pace, he was afraid, but for once he didn't let himself panic. He stayed focused, and then flapped his wing hard a few times at the last moment. It wasn't a great landing. He hit the ground hard, and had to run for a while in order to keep from falling flat on his beak.

"But I did it," he thought proudly as he looked towards the horizon, which was quickly brightening with the light of dawn. "Without having any flying pokémon to help in case I was in trouble. Just me, myself, and I."

The thought filled him with confidence as he started on his way. He loved working as a team, being with others, that much he couldn't deny. *But this is its own reward, too. I think I can live with being on my own, at least for a while, at least until I've finally found the courage I need.*

He was completely content in that thought for a while, walking along in the general direction of the rising sun on his way to the Eastern Guild. But right when he was starting to think that he already didn't like the idea of being alone for days on end, he heard the sound of several sets of paws running up behind him.

He turned, only to see Kuro, Aiden, and Zeke running up, with Kara tagging along on Zeke's back.

"Guys, what are you doing here?" Max asked as he ran up to meet them, both glad and annoyed. Though he couldn't lie that being alone even just on the journey to the Eastern Guild (nonetheless

traveling the north and looking for answers) was going to be boring and rather lonely, he really had been committed to doing it alone. He didn't want anyone along, including four of his closest friends. As they finally met up - Zeke and the rest of his group out of breath - Max continued, "I told you I was going alone! That's the whole point of this. So long as other pokémon are around, I rely on them, and so the only way I can overcome that is to have to rely on myself!"

"Like we were going to let you go by yourself," Kara said, speaking for the group while they were still catching their breath. "That's completely idiotic, no matter what you're trying to do. And I don't think Emma would be too proud of me if I just let another human walk out and face the same fate she's dealing with."

"But then I might as well just stay at the guild!" Max said. "So long as you guys are around, I'll stay the same coward I've always been."

"I disagree," Zeke said, a grin on his face. "You've already got the resolution to be stronger. Otherwise you wouldn't have even left. Just remember that, and having a little bit of backup along shouldn't get in the way of your plan. Besides, you'll be team leader. You'll be calling the shots of Team Courage."

Aiden wagged his tail. "I came up with the name," he said proudly.

"Woah, woah, wait. Team Courage?" Max said, completely flabbergasted. "You guys have got to understand, I'm serious about needing to do this alone! Besides, we're too big to be a proper team. Just forget it!"

Kuro let out a loud, barking laugh. "I don't think anyone's going to mind if we're a *bit* over the usual team size, Max. These are hardly conventional times, and you're hardly a conventional pokémon. Besides, the your guildmasters agree with our plan."

"You mean to say you told them that-" He was interrupted as he heard a loud flapping, and he looked up to see both Braviary and Mandibuzz circling downwards.

"Hey, Max! Didn't think we'd let you just leave the guild without sayin' goodbye, did ya?" Braviary shouted down as he and his mate landed next to the group, the downdraft from their massive wings nearly enough to blow Max off his feet.

He looked down at the ground, feeling a bit ashamed about running away from the guild, even though neither of them seemed particularly angry. "I didn't think you would let me go. But I really feel like I need to get out on my own, and fight on my own so that I can finally do some good! So don't make me go back to the guild!"

Braviary let out a loud guffaw. "We weren't even thinking about it!"

Mandibuzz looked over at her mate critically, then looked back to Max. "Maybe you weren't. Me, on the hand - bringing you back was the first thing that came to my mind when Luxray woke us up and told us you were leaving. But… You really feel strongly about this, don't you?"

"Enough to run from the safety of the guild," Max said, meeting Mandibuzz's eyes with his own determined guild. "So yes, I do feel strongly about going. And I feel strongly about going *alone.* " He cast a bit of an angry glare over at Zeke and the others.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I quite agree with them on the point that they should go along," Mandibuzz said. "What point will there be to your leaving if you end up captured instead?"

"There won't be a point if you're caught, that's for sure!" Braviary said, answering the rhetorical question. "Besides, if I know anything, it's that my old buddy Zeke'll keep a close eye on you, and I know that if he was strong as a luxio, he's even better now as a luxray! Can't speak for these other three-"

"-but I'm quite confident they'll be of help, as well," Mandibuzz said. "Team FireFang will be an asset, no doubt, since it sounds as if many of Kyurem's willing forces are ice types."

"And I've gotta admit, I like the spunk in that galvantula's spark!" Braviary added, causing Kara to vainly puff up a bit at her perch on Zeke's back.

Mandibuzz let out a bit of a sigh. "The point is, it would be downright stupid for you to go alone, dear. You need a team to help you out if the going gets rough."

"But I already told you that I need to do it alone," Max insisted, a bit put-off by the fact that Mandibuzz of all pokémon was flat-out calling him stupid. *I just don't trust myself to really try to be brave unless I have to be!* "If they're along, I'll just rely on them, and that's what I'm trying to *not* do!"

"Nonsense!" Braviary said. "You had enough resolve this morning to leave on your own, correct? No turning back?" Max nodded, and Braviary continued in his booming voice, "Well, resolve like that doesn't just disappear! You can stay committed and still not be stupid about it. Or are you going to quit just because things aren't going quite according to plan?"

"Of course not!" Max said without a second thought. No matter what, he didn't want to turn back now.

Mandibuzz smiled. "Then you'll be fine. If you weren't truly committed, you'd use this setback as an excuse to give in and come back to the guild. Since you're still planning on going through with it, I have faith that you'll accomplish what you're aiming to do." Then, turning more to the rest of the group, she said, "But you all, do be careful. I wouldn't forgive myself if something happens to you all while you're gone."

Zeke grinned. "No worries. We'll be back before you know it."

"Then we'll be off! Otherwise the guild'll think me 'n Truvel are neglecting our duties!" Braviary said as he took off, obviously not one for sentimental goodbyes. "I'm expecting big things from the five of you!"

Mandibuzz cast them all one last, motherly glance, but apparently had nothing more to say. She flapped upward and followed her mate back into the sky.

Max watched them go for a minute, then turned to the group, scowling at them. "I still didn't agree to this."

All of them without exception grinned, and Zeke said, "So, what do ya say, team leader? Where is Team Courage off to?"

"That's a-" he was about to say how stupid the name 'Team Courage' was, but he quickly realized that Aiden would probably take offense. No doubt he thought it was the most awesome, most original team name ever.

And I'm outnumbered by four pokémon who aren't going to take no for an answer, anyway… Guess there's nothing I can do about it.

He let out a sigh of capitulation and said, "Well, Team Courage, I guess it's off to the Eastern Guild we go."

[EDIT - I've had some confusion in later chapters, and I realize I didn't make it as clear or as major of a point as I should have. Therefore, did some editing, made it a lot clearer in the first bit of this chapter that Zoroark and all the guildmembers who attacked the Eastern Guild are good, and just were following the orders of their Guildmaster, who is almost undoubtedly under Kyurem's control and following Kyurem's orders.]

And, Max finally gets a team!

In other news… I HATE THIS CHAPTER. Because I got about 500 words into it when I realized that pretty much nothing happens except Max choosing to leave the guild. And a small, small bit of Kyurem influence. But I couldn't think of any way to spice the chapter up that really fit, so I then proceeded to write 5000 words' worth of fluff. (Okay, it wasn't ALL fluff because I did need some character

interactions in there and stuff, but it still felt fluffy and empty content-wise). It still didn't turn out too badly, methinks, but it was just a bit of a bore to write.

HOWEVER… Guys and gals, look forward to the next chapter. DEAR ARCEUS ABOVE, LOOK FORWARD TO THE NEXT CHAPTER. I'm done with it already since I won't have time to write at all in the coming week (I'll still be releasing it a week from now, as usual), and I just have to say that it might be the single most glorious set of 7,289 words I have ever put onto the metaphorical paper. Maybe this is just my author's vanity suddenly kicking in, and it's not actually that great… And I technically haven't reread it and proofread yet to see if it ended up as great as it sounded in my head.

But then again, PURE AWESOME isn't subjective, so next chapter is probably honestly that incredible.

crosses fingers and hopes I'm not getting your expectations up too terribly high

Chapter 26: Team Rebirth

Chapter Twenty-Six: Team Rebirth

Where… Where am I?

Vulpix opened her eyes slowly and at first looked around without even moving her head. She felt absolutely terrible from head to toe, and she knew that moving would only exacerbate the pain.

She couldn't see much. A bush that she was resting under partially obscured everything her field of vision. Still, she recognized where she was, although the area was quite a bit different from the last time she'd been here. Judging by the landscape, she was somewhere just west of Glowstone Caverns. But everything - the trees, the ground - was now covered in ice and a dusting of snow.

I knew the ice was progressing rapidly… But this much?

Reluctantly, she pushed herself up to a sitting position, yet she was so sore that doing even that much was downright painful.

"What did I do to myself?" She looked around again, and this time her eyes stumbled upon a small white sphere lying not too far away.

And then everything came flooding back to her mind. Though she'd never been able to remember the nightmares up until now, the previous night - or, rather, two nights ago - was crystal clear.

Almost unable to believe it, she reviewed it in her head, recalling it as if it had happened to someone else and not herself.

I… I woke up. Except I was still dreaming, still in that nightmare. It was Kyurem that was controlling me. I attacked Cobalion, and then I went to get the Light Stone, and-

"Oh… oh no. Bulbasaur. I hurt Bulbasaur," she said, tears coming from her eyes as the full weight of that and everything else hit her. "I hurt him and the others guarding the stone, and I ran out of the guild while other pokémon were attacking, and… and… I kept on running. I couldn't stop, I couldn't wake up from the nightmare. And Kyurem pushed me through the day… that was too fast for me to take. That's why I'm so sore. It'd normally take me two days to get here. Two days. It took me a night and a day this time. How did I get here so fast?" She let herself get caught up on that detail, trying to work it out in her mind how her body could survive being pushed to such limits. At least when she was thinking about that smaller detail, everything else faded into a cacophony of guilt in the background of her mind, obviously there but not quite put into words.

But she couldn't ignore the truth. She kept on reviewing the events that had led her up until now. "Then… I kept fighting mentally. His control was getting weaker. Kyurem knew he couldn't hold onto me much longer, so he hid me under here and… I collapsed. I woke up for a moment right when Kyurem let go, but I was too exhausted. I must've slept all the rest of that night and most of today… It's afternoon now, isn't it? Afternoon… And now… Now I'm actually awake again… Oh, what have I done?"

She moved as if to lie down, to shrink and hide from the rest of the world. She couldn't believe herself; right now, she figured that it really would've been better if Cobalion had just killed her. Then she wouldn't have been able to betray everyone.

But before she could lie down, she noticed a weight around her paws, and for the first time she looked down to see ice encircling her ankles, like frozen manacles. And she felt that her neck, too, was stiff; the collar had widened again, restricting the motion of her head somewhat. Though the frost that had invaded the whole of her body was now gone, these icy reminders remained.

Another tear leaked out of her eye and, in desperation, she forced a flamethrower out at her paw. The ice didn't shrink in the least.

I can't panic. I can't panic. I just… I'm too tired to go fast, but I can head back towards the guild. They'll have sent pokémon after me, I'm sure of it. I think… If I stay awake, I think I'll be able to keep fighting Kyurem off, even if he tries to take control again. If I can just get myself and the Light Stone back to the guildmembers, then they can sort things out. They can lock me up or whatever they need do do, and then I'll be safe, and the stone will be safe.

Though her muscles were protesting any movement whatsoever, she nonetheless got to her feet, picked up the Light Stone in her mouth, and began walking back in the direction of the guild.

But her starting point was barely out of sight when she knew something was wrong. Every step was becoming harder to take, as if her paws were made of lead. She forced herself to keep going, but in no time at all she was completely immobile, unable to so much as lift a paw.

She looked down at her feet. They were normal, as were the icy manacles at her ankles. Yet she had no doubt that those cuffs were restraining her, holding her back, becoming heavier with every step that resisted Kyurem's goal.

Just to be sure, she turned around and tried walking the other direction, towards the north and - she suspected - straight towards the Northern Guild. Her heart plummeted when she found that she was yet again could walk normally.

"Even now that I'm myself again, I still can't stop Kyurem's control," she said to herself, collapsing to the ground, already exhausted both mentally and physically even though she'd been awake for only a few minutes.

I'll just wait here… I have to, she thought to herself. *Maybe one of the flying pokémon from the guild will see me, or someone will catch up if I can stay awake for long enough to keep myself here. Or… Or I could shout out, hope that whoever hears me is a good pokémon*

who would take the Light Stone to the guild and tell the others where I am.

She sat up once again and drew a breath to call out, but she stopped herself. If Kyurem had enough pokémon to attack the guild, there could be more of his pokémon out here somewhere, ready to speed up her journey towards the so-called Lord of Ice. But aside from her worry that the wrong pokémon might hear, there was another, more important matter that caused her to stop her shout before it had started.

She was suddenly afraid, not of Kyurem and his followers, but of her own guild.

And what happens when the guild gets a hold of me again? I'll… Cobalion and Virizion have no reason to have mercy on me now. They'll want me dead, and after what I've done, at least some of the guild will agree. Maybe most of them. I probably don't even have Bulbasaur's support anymore… I can't believe I actually attacked him. With a fire blast. That's… he's so scared of fire. Even if he can forgive me, he won't forget. Even he will be scared of me, scared of the monster I'm becomign. Everyone…

What if they kill me?

The thought terrified her more than anything else. She wanted nothing more than to do what was right, to return the Light Stone. But at the cost of her own life?

I'm… I don't think I can make that sacrifice. Instead… I'll leave the Light Stone here and hope someone good finds it, and I'll hide somewhere and just… stay awake for as long as I can? But eventually, no matter what… Kyurem's going to get me again. I… I need to think about this. I need to go somewhere where no one can find me and just think about what I'm going to do.

She once again forced her tired body up, picked up the Light Stone and hid it, and then tried to walk towards the only place she could

think of that was, theoretically, near enough in the direction of north for her to move towards it: Glowstone Caverns.

But almost immediately, her paws became heavy, and a panicked feeling rose inside her. She didn't like this sensation of being chained, of being restricted, of doing exactly what Kyurem wanted. It was like Kyurem was just messing with her, forcing her to move towards him even now that she had control of her body. She almost wished that if things were going to be like this, that he would just take over completely again. At least that way, she wouldn't have this false illusion of being free from him, albeit temporarily.

Vulpix fought back the panic and fixed what she figured was the problem. She grabbed the Light Stone and tried again. Sure enough, even though she wasn't going exactly in the same direction as Kyurem had been leading her, it was close enough that the manacles stayed light as she put her sore paws down one by one, one in front of the other.

It didn't take her long to find Glowstone Caverns. Though Vulpix hadn't been inside them at all since first washing up on the shore of that underground river, she'd been in the general area often enough on missions.

This… place is where my memory starts, she thought as she entered the all honesty, she didn't remember much from that day, or at least not clearly. It was more a blur of emotions and confusion. The manacles didn't stop her no matter which direction she went - perhaps Kyurem wanted her here, or perhaps her paws continued to work simply because even she herself didn't know quite which way she was going once she was very far into the cavern. She didn't remember where the river was inside the caverns, yet she wanted to return to it. To see that river with her own eyes now that she understood things better. Maybe she could find out why she was connected to Kyurem, some hint as to why she'd woken up as she was.

She was in a daze. It might've taken her hours, or maybe only a few minutes in the dank cave to find the river, but find it she did.

This is it. This is the place. She dropped the Light Stone on the ground and walked up to the exact curve in the river where she'd washed ashore, forcing herself to bite back the fear that rose in her from being close not only to deep running water, but to this particular river. This was the source of her main fear, the one thing she couldn't overcome. She could still remember the feeling - being dragged beneath the surface, the still water pushing her down, her necklace pulling her down, her own clothes weighing her-

Still water? Clothes? Clothes were… that was a human thing! *Why did I think of that? Clothes are… I can't even remember what they are, but they were dragging me down like fur! Am I remembering something from when I was a human? Did I… Did I nearly drown once as a human, too? Is there more to my fear of water than the first day I remember?*

She backed up, but continued to look at the river in the dim glow of the moss-covered stalactites and stalagmites, just trying to remember anything more.

But it was still just those sensations. It hadn't been a river - it had been still water, cold like the river but definitely not the same. Something had dragged down at her neck, but had she had the necklace of ice even then, as a human? That didn't seem right. So something else?

If I really almost drowned as a human, too, then maybe that explains why I'm so terribly afraid of water. If it happened twice, back then and right at the first time that I remember, it'd make sense that I'd be so scared of it. Why it's the only thing I'm so afraid of.

Except… Except it's not the only thing I'm afraid of, is it?

She was hiding from her own guild, from her own partner, just because she was terrified of what they would do to her. She had

never been afraid of battling strong opponents, she'd never shirked from the pain that those strong opponents sometimes caused… But the threat of death was another thing entirely, and she was only too convinced that the guild had to be contemplating such a fate for her. Maybe Emolga would still oppose such a sentence, but only if she didn't feel too betrayed…

But who was to say Emolga or a friendly pokémon would even be the one to find her? If it was Cobalion or Virizion, then Vulpix didn't doubt they'd kill her on the spot. And that thought scared her nearly as much as any fast-moving current. That concept of death was just so abstract that until now, she hadn't given it much thought.

Now, death seemed to be looming just ahead of her no matter which way she turned. Go back now, and she would suffer death by the hands of her own guild and the Warriors of Justice. She almost couldn't blame them for wanting her gone, but even understanding their motivations didn't make her any less afraid of the end result. If she didn't go back or wait for the guild, then she would wind up in Kyurem's grasp, which as far as she was concerned was just as bad.

Vulpix suddenly heard a noise, footsteps somewhere further in the cavern. She had no idea if it was a regular resident of Glowstone Caverns or - as her frightened, confused mind tended to think - a pursuer ready to end her.

I'm… I'm not ready to face anyone yet! I don't know what I want to do yet! I… I have to get out of here!

She felt trapped down here in these caves, so she hurried back the way she came, leaving the sound far behind her. In no time, she was back outside. But she still felt like she needed to be on the move, to get as far away from Glowstone Caverns as possible. Yet she could go only one direction. It was the last direction she wanted to go, but she still couldn't find the courage to stay here and wait, come what may.

So with guilt in her heart, she began to trek farther northward.

As she walked slowly on the snow and ice that covered the once warm landscape, thoughts and fears swirled through her head. She was terrified of the very pokémon she'd once called friends, frightened of the guild she'd always relied on. Despite her fear of them, every step she took made her more and more disgusted with herself, because she was putting the whole world in danger just because she was afraid for her own skin. It was selfish and stupid… And yet she kept walking, not knowing what else she could do.

And that's why I'm not worthy to be either Zekrom's or Reshiram's hero… I put myself first above everyone else, just because I'm scared. Max called himself a coward a lot during the Solstice Games, but I'm the real coward.

I should stop… I have to. No matter what they do to me. My body is already exhausted. I'll only be able to stay awake for so long. Maybe through tonight, or maybe through tomorrow at best. But if I doze off for even a moment, Kyurem will have me again… At least for Reshiram's sake, I have to stop, have to let someone find me.

But still she didn't stop for some time, continually going back and forth between guilt and her fears of both the guild that pursued her and the monster that beckoned her north.

She ended up going farther than she meant. She was just so caught up in worry that by the time she really took a look around, it was evening and she was much farther north than she'd intended. Cold wind bit through her fur as surveyed the landscape around her, looking at the groves of dying evergreens that clustered in between large patches completely void of anything but snow. She was in one of those patches now, and for a moment, she wondered what had created such a featureless and flat area. On a hunch, she dug at the snow a bit.

Sure enough, after a couple inches, she hit solid ice. She was on a lake, a lake that was - judging by the numerous other treeless areas scattered around her - part of a chain of lakes. This had to be Frozen Lakes. She'd never been here, but she'd seen it on her map before.

For once, such a vast expanse of water didn't trouble her, even though she was right on top of it. Perhaps that was partly due to the thick ice between her and the actual liquid, but there was more to it than that. Vulpix was completely exhausted, mentally, and didn't have the energy to worry anymore. She had no one to rely on, no one to consult. And…

I don't want to run.

Her guilt had gotten the better of her. She couldn't possibly go any farther. She was a danger to everyone so long as Kyurem still had his hold on her. And she didn't want that.

I… I don't want to do anything that could doom this world. But I can't trust myself not to. I've been bringing the Light Stone nearer and nearer to Kyurem for much of today, consciously and willingly. Once I fall asleep, there won't be any stopping me…

… I give up… I refuse to let myself hurt anyone more, especially after I already hurt Bulbasaur.

Without thinking about it, she put the Light Stone down at her side and began shooting a flamethrower at the ice in front of her. It took some time, but eventually, there was a smooth hole leading down to the black waters nearly three feet below the surface of the ice.

If I stop myself now, then I won't be a threat anymore. It's not much, but it's the best I can do.

She widened the hole in front of her with another flamethrower, ignoring the fearful choking sensation in her throat as she saw more and more water. Now the hole was big enough that she could easily fall down it, if she made the wrong step or if she… or if she jumped in on purpose. The sides of the ice hole were smooth and nearly vertical. Once she was in, there would be no getting out.

If the guild is still looking for me, then maybe they'll see my footprints leading here. Hopefully they'll be the ones to find the Light Stone, so

that Reshiram can be woken up by whichever human is the hero he deserves.

She sat there, staring into the hole at the black water below. One minute passed. Then five. Then she lost track of time. She couldn't bring herself to move, to take that step that would be the end of her, that step that would stop her from hurting anyone else.

Surely… There has to be another way…

… *I'm terrified.*

She knew in her heart that there was no other way. Yet eventually, she gave up trying to steel herself for the task. No matter how she tried to reason with herself, she couldn't do it. She couldn't take her own life. It was too scary, and it felt… it felt too wrong. No matter how much a risk she was to the entire world, she felt as if there had to be something she could do other than give up on herself.

Vulpix refused to kill herself, that much was certain; but she also refused to help Kyurem any more than she had. There was only one thing left for her to do.

She took the Light Stone in her mouth, backed away from the hole a safe distance, then sat down, curled her rumpled tails around her and waited in the middle of the lake. Come what may, someone would have to stumble across her there, be it friend or foe. Hopefully friend. She was still certain that the guild wouldn't have given up the hope of catching her before she made it to Kyurem, not until they had sure reason to. Someone either in the sky or on the ground would come find her.

The sky was growing dimmer with the setting of the sun when someone finally came. Vulpix wasn't paying attention to anything by then. There was nothing to keep her interested, and she was having trouble keeping herself awake when all she wanted to do was curl up to keep away the cold.

"Vulpix!"

She jerked herself back into full wakefulness and looked up, only to see Bulbasaur running towards her.

"Bulbasaur…" she said to herself, almost uncomprehendingly at first. Then, as the truth finally registered, she temporarily forgot how much she'd hurt him just two nights ago. She got to her feet and tried to run to him, but she only got a few steps when she literally tripped over her own feet, too numb to compensate for the sudden increase in the weight of her manacles.

Right as she got to her feet, Bulbasaur made it to her and literally tackled her in as close a thing to a hug as a bulbasaur can manage.

"Vulpix, you're okay!" he said, getting off of her and looking her up and down, as if he couldn't believe she was still in one piece; his eyes caught momentarily on the ice cuffs, but he ignored them for the moment. "I thought… I thought for sure you'd be like Emma and Cody, the way I saw you last! You were all covered in ice… And your eyes… And… But you're okay! And you're yourself now, right?"

She nodded, but was suddenly a lot less happy. She could see patches of raw skin on Bulbasaur, much like the burns he'd had when she'd first met him, after his home's forest fire. The burns she saw now… they were her fault. "Bulbasaur… I'm so, so sorry I hurt you. I could see what I was doing, but Kyurem was in control and I was trying to fight it, but I couldn't and-"

"It's okay!" Bulbasaur interrupted before she could completely break down from the guilt. "It's okay, really. Miltank helped heal me, got some rawst paste on it. It doesn't even hurt anymore."

"But… You looked so scared," she said, tears coming from her eyes. "You must hate me. I deserve it! I hate myself, because I couldn't fight Kyurem off!"

Bulbasaur shook his head. "Don't think like that! I'm okay, really. I'm scared of fire, and it hurt a lot, but afterwards, when I woke up… Well, I was a lot more scared of the idea of you being gone. Once I was up, I immediately hitched a ride with Fearow from the guild and went out to join the search, and I kept on looking for you even when Fearow went back for the night. I ended up near Glowstone Caverns, and I thought that maybe, there was a chance you'd gone by there… It was hard to see for sure since there wasn't much snow around there, but there was some sort of track through the snow. I followed it, and I ended up here. For a while, before I found any clue as to where you were… I honestly didn't know what I'd do, if you were already completely gone. I was terrified. I didn't even know what I'd do with myself if that happened. I already lost my parents, and if I lost you, too…"

Vulpix touched her nose to his affectionately, silencing him. "And I thought I'd already lost you… I thought you'd hate me or be scared of me after I did that to you."

He withdrew from the contact, only so that he could move next to her and press his body against hers. "Nope, not at all!" he said happily. "Now, what do you say we get out of this cold dreary place? We should get back as soon as possible. Do you have the Light Stone, or…?" She nodded and looked over to where it was. He grabbed it with a vine, then said, "A couple of the search parties have run into enemy search parties, so we need to hurry. They were mainly ice types and pokémon that can tolerate the cold up here, and they're all looking for you, too. They're probably from the Northern Guild, so - oh, you haven't even heard about that yet! But there'll be time to fill you in later. Let's go!"

With his other vine, Bulbasaur grabbed her paw just above the manacle and took a couple steps back the way he'd came. But rather than follow, Vulpix sat down.

"Huh? Vulpix, what's wrong?" Bulbasaur asked.

She looked down at the ground. "I… I can't. Literally. This ice…" she lifted up a paw. "Every time I try to go any direction other than towards the Northern Guild, they get too heavy for me to walk. I'm stuck here, Bulbasaur. And… And will the guild really welcome me back? Or are they going to… to do what Cobalion suggested all along?"

Bulbasaur glared angrily at nothing in particular, suddenly enraged. "That jerk Cobalion is advocating that again, but I won't let him touch you! And Emolga specifically ordered that we could only use what force was necessary to get you, but…" he trailed off.

"… but now, most of the guild would rather see me dead. Right?" she asked glumly.

He nodded. "But like I said, I won't let them lay a paw on you! I'll wait here with you until someone else finds us, and we'll get them to carry you back, and we'll make sure that Kyurem can't ever get a hold of you again!"

"But there's nothing we can do to stop me acting out again… Even if my intentions are good now, I'll still try to betray you all again," she said, a note of despair creeping into her voice. "Once I fall asleep, it'll happen again. Earlier, I was about ready to… to… to end myself for good, to make sure I couldn't do anything bad, once and for all." She glanced over at the hole in the ice not too far away.

Bulbasaur looked at the hole and back to her, uncomprehendingly at first, then disbelievingly. "Vulpix… Don't you ever even think about that!" Bulbasaur practically shouted at her. "I already told you that I don't know what I'd do if you were gone!"

"But what am I supposed to do, Bulbasaur?" she shouted back. "I'm a danger to everyone around me, including you! I was too selfish to actually kill myself, but what if Cobalion and everyone is right? What if all I am is a danger? What if the whole world would be better off if I was dead?"

"I don't care!" Bulbasaur said. "We're getting you back either way! Like I said, I'll wait here with you-"

"But if there are other pokémon after me not from the guild, then that's too risky!" Vulpix interjected. "You need to take the Light Stone and get back to someone else. Get it away from me as soon as possible, so I can't take it again. And then you can send someone back after me who can carry me, but only do that after the Light Stone is safe. And after that… I'll rot locked up in the Western Guild. Or they'll kill me."

Bulbasaur threw the Light Stone on the ground in anger. "There's gotta be some other way! There's gotta be a way to get rid of that stupid ice, because I'm not going to let them lock you up forever for something you couldn't help! And I'm not leaving your side, because the other pokémon who are after you could come any time!"

"I don't like it either, but there's nothing we can do about it," Vulpix said sadly. "Even if I could get rid of the ice, of Kyurem's control, I don't think anyone would trust me again. Cobalion and the other Warriors of Justice still might try to kill me. Please, just get the Light Stone to safety. That's what's most important. What happens to me… well, it almost doesn't matter anymore. I'm doomed no matter what."

Bulbasaur calmed down a bit, but still he answered resolutely, "I'm not leaving you. There has to be another way."

Vulpix looked off forlornly towards the nearest grove of cold, dead evergreens, which in the twilight were little more than a silhouette against the horizon. All she'd been thinking about all day were alternatives to her grim fate… But there were none.

Even if it wouldn't help with everyone else's sentiments toward her, she wanted nothing more than to get rid of the ice that had already caused her to do so much damage. *But that's impossible. No little fire attack is even touching it anymore, either the necklace or the cuffs. I'd need…*

Her thoughts trailed off as she really looked at the grove of trees, an idea coming to her mind. The idea… It was a stupid idea, she knew that. Yet it wasn't so much the idea itself that she cared about.

I just don't want to give up, and I don't want to just be locked away. I want to get rid of this ice. I want to be able to trust myself again, I want to know that I won't hurt my friends the moment I doze off. I'm not content to just sit and wait for my Fate.

I want to fight it.

She got to her feet, and bulbasaur looked at her questioningly, seeing new hope in her eyes. "Vulpix? What's going on?"

"Bulbasaur, you keep the Light Stone with you," she said. "I don't trust myself around it. But while you keep a hold of it, would you help me knock down some of those trees over there and form them into a pile?"

Bulbasaur wasn't stupid; he could guess at least part of her plan. "But if we start a signal fire, everyone will see it, whether they want to help or hurt you. It'd be better to just wait and hope for the best."

Instead of addressing his concerns, she answered with a question. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course," he said without a moment's hesitation.

"Then just help me with this one thing," Vulpix said.

He looked at her for a moment longer. Then he nodded. "Let's get to it, then."

The darkness made their work hard, but eventually their eyes adjusted and the work sped up. The evergreens were fairly small, and all were dead from the drastic change in climate over the past few years, making them brittle. A fire blast from Vulpix was short and intense enough to compromise the integrity of each trunk; a round of

razorleafs from Bulbasaur, followed up by a tackle from Vulpix, was enough to topple the trees completely. Moving them was more difficult, but the wood was dry from being dead so long, making it light. Hours passed and the night continued, but neither friend nor foe found them in the darkness. No doubt they all had to rest, and so Team Rebirth's efforts continued uninterruptedly.

Both Vulpix and Bulbasaur had been exhausted before the work even began, but still they continued for hours, until the entirety of the small, isolated grove was piled up in the center of their past haven, a thicker part of a strip of land between lakes.

"All right, so what now?" Bulbasaur said once they had finished, looking at the pile.

"You still trust me?" Vulpix asked.

He smiled a bit, and said jokingly, "Well, I've been helping you cut down trees for the past few hours in the middle of the night… I might not trust your judgment so much anymore. But you - you I still trust."

"Then you might want to step back."

Bulbasaur did so, the Light Stone held in a vine, but he still seemed to have his doubts. "If you light a fire, then everyone all around will see it. I already told you that. And you're still going to do it? What are you planning?"

She didn't answer; she knew he'd try to stop her the moment she told him the truth. Instead, she shot a steady flamethrower straight into the heart of the pile of trees, and before long the pile was a blaze that towered far into the air, so hot that any snow and ice within thirty feet of it practically vaporized, becoming clouds of steam illuminated white that surrounded the plume of smoke far above.

Bulbasaur was far back by now, no doubt wanting to stay as far away from the blaze as he could. Vulpix, however, was right next to it; the heat was almost too much for her to bear, but her heat-

resistant fur at least kept her from injury even at such close proximity.

"Vulpix! Get away from there! You'll get hurt!"

Vulpix looked over to him, just barely hearing his voice over the roar of the flames. But her mind was focused only on the feeling of confidence rising inside of her. She wasn't afraid any longer. She wasn't going to give up. The fire in front of her was terrifying, but glorious. And, moreover, it was the source of her hope. She was gambling everything on this stupid plan, this stupid plan that she'd come up with just to give her something to hope for. She could die doing this, but-

No. I'll do whatever I can to get out of this ice, including something as stupid as this. But I won't die. Not here. Not now.

She looked down at her feet, and to her surprise she saw that her plan was working. Her stupid plan - she didn't even know how she'd thought of it, she didn't even know how it made sense, since from the beginning it had only been about giving herself some hope, about continuing to try every last option even against all odds. She had wanted to see if maybe a big enough, hot enough fire would melt the ice that bound her. She had just wanted to believe for a few hours that such a simple, stupid plan could work. And that stupid plan *was* working, somehow. The ice cuffs were glistening as the outermost surface continually melted and evaporated, and she could only hope her necklace was doing the same thing.

But it wasn't enough.

Vulpix cast one last, resolute gaze back towards Bulbasaur, and it was only then that he saw what she was about to do. He ran towards her, braving even the heat of the fire that no doubt hurt him more than it hurt her.

She didn't wait for him to catch up. Vulpix turned and, pawstep by pawstep, she entered the fire. Yet she was barely into it when she

felt a vine around one of her back paws, keeping her from going further in. "Vulpix, don't do this!" Bulbasaur shouted as he stayed as far away from the main body of the fire as the length of his vine would allow. "It's not going to work! We'll figure out some other way to get the ice off!"

"Bulbasaur, let go!" Vulpix shouted back, flinching now at the pain that the front half of her body was experiencing in the flames. It wasn't too terrible here at the edge, but it nonetheless stung, and it would only get worse the farther in she went. But she was prepared for it. Again, she repeated, "Let go, please! Just trust me!"

"I do trust you, but I'm not letting you kill yourself!" Bulbasaur said. She could feel the vine's grasp starting to weaken, as if it was shriveling in the intense heat.

I have to do this! I'm not even sure if it's the heat of the fire, or if it's just that I'm not willing to let anything stop me anymore… I'm not sure what's making this work. But either way, I have to keep going!

She yanked her paw out of his now loose grasp, then dashed further into the fire, amid the splintering trunks and the brightest, almost white-hot flames. Vulpix closed her eyes against the light and heat, but even without her vision she could feel her flame retardant fur starting to singe and burn.

I can still feel the weight at my feet. I have to go further!

Slowly now, just trying not to pass out from the absolute lack of air and the pain assaulting her body as she literally felt herself starting to burn alive, she went further in. Each step became harder, and she became more and more afraid that maybe this plan had been just as idiotic as it seemed, that maybe she wouldn't be able to make it out of this alive.

She risked one peek down, opening her eyes for just a second. The band of ice was as wide as before, but barely thicker than a strand of fur now. But still it persisted, refusing to phase out entirely.

I'm nearly at my limit… I could turn around now. But if it's still there at all, then all of this will have been for nothing! I keep going! She took one more, resolute step forward. *I'm not the vulpix I woke up as, scared of the world! I'll do whatever it takes to take charge of my own life!*

And suddenly, everything changed. The roar of the fire disappeared almost instantly, instead replace with a sound almost just as loud, like some mighty gust of wind. Vulpix opened her eyes and looked around her to see the fire being sucked up into a single extremely bright point of white light somewhere above her.

"It's the Light Stone!" Bulbasaur shouted at her as he ran up through the now cool cinders. As soon as he was next to her again and sure that she was at least not dead, he looked back up to the sky with her. "It just… The Light Stone just flew up into the sky! I don't know why-"

The absorption of the fire stopped one moment, and in the next, a giant white pokémon was there hovering in the air, glowing faintly in the night. Vulpix looked up at him in awe as, for the briefest of moments, he hovered there, one of his massive feet hanging not far above her own head, that relatively small part of him easily longer than Vulpix was from head to tail.

For a moment, the Reshiram hovered there, completely still.

Then Reshiram, one of the two pokémon who embodied the Spirit of the land, went berserk.

He flapped madly in no specific direction, going back and forth and breathing flames straight into the air, his tail blazing with energy. He didn't even seem aware of Bulbasaur and Vulpix beneath him, nor did he look as if he knew where he was. He seemed confused and enraged. The gusts from the frantic flapping knocking Vulpix onto her stomach, where she stayed, pinned by the force.

"I will NEVER allow myself to be tamed!" he roared to the sky as his tail flared and he flew up higher. "No hero shall subdue me and force

me to do Kyurem's bidding, like what happened to Zekrom! I will find Zekrom and free her before that can happen, and we shall set the world right!"

Before Vulpix and Bulbasaur could do anything - before they could even think of what they would possibly do or say in response to that - the blaze of Reshiram's tail was fading into the distance as he flew away, still breathing flame out wildly with every flap of his wings.

It was dark again. For a minute, the two simply stared up at where the dot of light had vanished in the distance.

"Vulpix, are you okay? You're shaking like crazy!" Bulbasaur suddenly said, breaking both of them out of their daze.

Vulpix looked down at herself. Long swaths of fur were completely burned away, revealing angry red skin below; what fur that did remain was seared almost black, that much she could see even in the darkness of the night. The trembling came from the pain of the burns, and the shock her body was going through. She knew that what she'd done was stupid, and that if not for Reshiram's sudden appearance, she wouldn't have made it out alive.

Yet as she looked down at her body, none of that mattered. She only registered the severity of the burns as a passing note in her brain. Instead, she focused on her paws, and a sigh of relief escaped her.

The icy shackles were completely gone.

Vulpix turned to Bulbasaur, too ecstatic to pay any mind to the pain. "Bulbasaur, the necklace! Is it still there?"

He squinted in the darkness. "Yeah, it is, but it's back to its normal small self!" he said. And then, suddenly, she heard him sobbing right next to her. "Don't you EVER do that again! I thought you were gonna die, Vulpix!"

She smiled at him and touched one of her paws to his shoulder comfortingly. "I had to do it. And it worked. I don't know how, or why… but it worked, Bulbasaur. I may not be completely free of Kyurem yet, but…" she trailed off as her gaze drifted away from her partner, her mind suddenly lost in confusion. Slowly at first, but soon flooding in like some great tidal waves, were memories. Fun times, stupid times, times when she'd been angry, times when she'd been scared. Times not from her life as a pokémon, but of before that. Her entire life as a human seemed to be streaming in through her eyes, flooding her head as vibrantly as if they were happening right then and there.

Bulbasaur didn't immediately see her shock, her daze; he was too caught up in a realization of his own. "You do know what Reshiram waking up means, right? That means you were his hero all along! Of course, he's upset about Zekrom being attacked by Kyurem through Emma, you haven't heard about that yet… But still, the others at the guild have got to forgive you now, so we can go back to the guild! Right?" Finally, he saw that something was wrong. "… Vulpix? Vulpix! Are you okay! Is it the burns - don't worry, we'll get you back to the guild and-"

Vulpix shook her head, trying to clear her head of the rush of memories. There were more important things to attend to right now, and she didn't have the time to sort them out. "Bulbasaur, we can't go back," she said.

"What? Why not?" he asked, his voice filled with dismay. "It'll be fine now that you woke up Reshiram!"

She shook her head. "But he flew away, enraged. I think you're right, I think he's just angry because of Zekrom. It might've been because I have a connection with Kyurem, too, and he sensed that, but… I think I have to go after him. I feel it. I have to make him see that we have to work together, because he's out of control now." Vulpix wasn't sure how she knew this. The instinct that had made her think of building the fire felt as if it was still guiding her now, telling her something that was true even though she had no proof.

Vulpix's body was still trembling, and she was more exhausted than she had ever been in her life, yet she was thinking more clearly than ever. She continued, "But anyone who saw that show of his just now will know that Reshiram flew off, and they'll come to see what he was running from or angry at. Cobalion and everyone else won't believe us. They'll think he flew away because he *knew* I was serving Kyurem. They'll want to kill me, just the same as always."

Bulbasaur's eyes, just barely dry from before, now filled again with tears. "But that's not fair! They've gotta see reason!"

"They won't, and I don't blame them… Well, at least not completely," Vulpix said, still trying to blink back the flashes of memory exploding in her head. *Now isn't the time… I've been wanting to know for so long, but now isn't the time!* "I have to run. I'm going to go after Reshiram, see if I can find him and talk to him. You can go back to the other guildmembers and try to make them understand what happened. I think I'll be able to keep control of myself now… I refuse to let Kyurem take control again, to let the ice grow and give him an avenue into me. I don't know how I'll stop it, but I won't let it happen."

"No way I'm going back and leaving you to talk to Reshiram all alone!" Bulbasaur said. "And not to mention, you'll have to fight off any other pokémon that try to get a hold of you, whether they're guild or not! If you really have to do this, then I'm going with you!"

Vulpix smiled, and with a bit of a laugh, she admitted, "Actually, I was really hoping you'd say that. Let's get going, then - pokémon will be swarming here in no time." She started off at a shaky trot, her muscles almost refusing to cooperate. But she didn't have time to listen to their exhaustion, their pain. She had to find Reshiram, and she had to get away from here.

Bulbasaur hopped alongside her, looking at her with concern. "Are you sure you'll be okay? You look… Well, you look terrible."

"I'll be fine," Vulpix said. "Just… keep an eye out for a place we can safely hide. I do need to rest, and I bet you do, too."

Bulbasaur let out a worried chuckle. "You just worry about yourself. I'm not the one who just walked into the heart of a fire."

"Hey Bulbasaur?"

"Yeah?" he asked.

"There's one more thing I've got to tell you."

"What's that?"

A tear leaked out of her eye as the last and most important of her memories came rushing to the forefront of her mind: her very last moments as a human.

"I remember," she said, in little more than a whisper. "Bulbasaur, everything from before I woke up in Glowstone Caverns… I remember everything."

WOAH. Yeah. That all just happened. Hope it lived up to how much I hyped it up last chapter. Oh, who am I kidding? Of COURSE it lived up to that hype. ^_^

There is nothing more that I really need say, except that I suddenly feel as if I'm very close to the end of the fic… Which isn't really true, but it feels that way to me. I've really been enjoying it and it's much more focused than past fics I've written, so it's gone by seemingly much faster than usual.

Oh, actually, one more thing. Now would be a really good time to refresh your mind on the prologue, if you haven't read it in a while. There's some hints in it that make a lot more sense with this chapter up, and other parts of it are going to start showing up soon. Just a thought.

Chapter 27: Alexa and Cecil

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Alexa and Cecil

"Cecil, Cecil! Slow down already and let's talk about this!" Alexa shouted as she clenched her talons tightly around the dull side of one of Cecil's scythes. The other scythe helped to hold her in place against his stomach as he ran forward at top speed, soon leaving the dark shadows of the forest behind and breaking out onto the colder, windswept tundra. "You know, normally people run *away* from giant fires and angry legendary pokémon, not towards them!"

Cecil didn't respond, instead clutching her all the tighter and speeding up.

I feel so helpless, Alexa thought to herself as, relenting, she fluffed up her feathers and pushed herself against Cecil's body in as warm a position as she could manage without messing up the splint on her wing. It was the middle of the night, and without the sun it was colder than ever here. *It's bad enough that I'm so tiny, but now that I've got a broken wing, I can't do anything. Can't make him stop, probably couldn't even get out from how he's pressing me to his body…*

… *not like I don't trust him.* Though she said those words in her mind, she wasn't sure if she could quite believe them. Doubts still gnawed at her heart, making it flutter every now and then. No matter how much she tried, she still couldn't reconcile the scyther known as Edge with her human friend Cecil, even though they were one and the same. Yes, Cecil had liked to fight. But kill? Alexa had never in a million years thought him capable of that. Of course, as far as she knew, they really could be a million years in the future, or in the past, or maybe time didn't even apply in a completely different world such as this. Everything was just so different. She'd staked her hopes on Cecil being exactly as he'd always been, but now even that concept of him had been shattered.

What if he's not even chasing Reshiram, or whatever that pokémon was that appeared right as the fire ended? Alexa wondered. *What if that's just a ploy? As far as I know, maybe he's different because Kyurem already got a hold of him. Maybe he's like Vulpix with that sleepwalking she'd do, or maybe he's like that sneasel who came after us. Maybe he's carrying me into a trap right now, bringing me straight to Kyurem.*

She allowed herself panic for just a moment before forcing herself to calm down. *That's silly. The sneasel wouldn't have come after us in the first place if Cecil was on her side. Unless she didn't know about it, but still… It's probably just the same old Cecil. He's just changed in some ways. Guess I've probably changed, too. Here, where I'm usually able to fly, I feel completely refreshed, completely liberated. Definitely different than I used to feel as a human. Maybe he feels the same in battle? Maybe that's why he goes all out? But…*

No matter the reasoning, Alexa still didn't like the idea. These scythes that held her so firmly now had killed pokémon before. Perhaps they'd kill pokémon again. They'd already been so close to killing her, when they'd first met and battled just two days ago. Even though he was really Cecil, the person she'd been searching for for so long, was this really the kind of guy she wanted to be hanging around?

She sighed and looked out over the edge of his scythe. Even with him going through such pains to keep her and her wing from getting too jostled, he was still zooming across the flat white landscape at an incredible speed. Occasionally, they veered off one way or another in order to avoid a cluster of trees. More often, they had to change course when they came upon one of several other groups of pokémon who, like Cecil, were heading towards where they'd last seen a blaze reaching into the sky and the light of some massive pokémon disappearing into the darkness of the sky.

Cecil's probably avoiding these groups so that he can go after his real prize, Alexa thought to herself pessimistically. *On any other*

night, would he be hunting them down and killing them, just like he's done with others?

"Who do you think these groups are, anyway?" Alexa asked in an attempt to brush off that gloomier train of thought, though she didn't really expect a response. "Guild pokémon, or more pokémon like that sneasel and her group?"

Cecil didn't speak.

"So why are we going after that pokémon that flew off? You want to explain that?" Alexa prodded. "Let's assume it's Reshiram like we both think, since honestly, we both know that there aren't many things of that size that glow and fly. Let's assume we don't get captured by the guilds who hate you still, or by Kyurem's little groupies, who seem pretty intent on getting their cold paws on us. Let's assume that, by some miracle, you manage to catch up with Reshiram. What in Arceus's name are you going to do then? Fight him?"

"Yes."

"But that's insane!" Alexa shouted at him, not missing a beat. "I don't care how strong you are. You can't defeat him!"

Cecil glanced down at her briefly, then immediately returned his eyes to straight ahead of him. "Doesn't matter. I want to battle him anyway."

"You're so frustrating sometimes, you know that?"

Alexa saw him grin a bit, but his voice remained neutral as he replied, "Time to be quiet for a bit. I see where the fire was up ahead, and other pokémon might be snooping around it, too."

Alexa let out a little puff of annoyance, but stayed quiet as she peeked out once again and saw in the starlight a charred pile of trees stacked up like a pyre, rising up out of the otherwise empty

landscape around them; as best she could tell by their relative location to Glittering Forest, Alexa guessed they were at the area called Frozen Lakes.

Once there, they snuck into the cinders and debris and hid themselves for a few minutes, lying low as they listened for anyone nearby. But when no one appeared and Cecil's keen senses still detected no one about, they cautiously moved back out into the open. For the first time that night, Alexa used her own two feet to get around, hopping around tenderly on the dry ground now that, thanks to the earlier fire, was now completely clear of snow. Cecil followed just behind her, not letting her out of his sight. Regardless of whether or not they had heard anyone, he was clearly still entertaining the possibility of someone jumping out of the dark and attacking.

"So… Where is everyone?" Alexa asked as a new gust of north wind blew against her, dampening her feathers with snow crystals. She looked up and saw that the stars were quickly being blotted out by the outermost clouds of a coming storm.

Cecil silently took the lead and walked around the pile of ashen trees, skirting close to where the snow still remained intact, far from where the fire itself had been. "There," he said eventually, pointing to a large group of footprints that extended out further into the darkness.

"So what?" Alexa said. "There are a bunch of pokémon's footprints who came here, on all different sides of the pile. We've been passing them as we circled."

"But these are the only set of tracks leaving the fire, and there's a lot more of them along this one route."

Alexa took a closer look, saw that he was right, and promptly pushed aside her own embarrassment at being so unobservant. "Okay, so… Did all the pokémon who showed up here leave together? Do you think all these prints belong to pokémon like that sneasel from yesterday?"

"Either that, or everyone who came here all followed the same set of tracks out of here, or simply all went in the same direction," Cecil said. "This did look like where Reshiram went, so maybe he's what they're after. Let's hurry and follow them."

Cecil extended a scythe for her to hop on, but she almost didn't. Doubts still lingered concerning him and whether she really wanted to be with him any longer. Not to mention, the snow was falling more heavily now, and the smart thing to do would've been to hole up among the burnt trees and take shelter from the coming blizzard.

However, she knew she didn't have much of a choice. Her wing was still broken, and there were probably more of Kyurem's followers who would be coming to this burnt pile of trees. She'd much prefer to take her chances with an old friend than a bunch of icy thugs.

Soon they were off, Cecil choosing to fly for as long as he could manage so that his footprints wouldn't be able to be seen amongst the others. But he couldn't keep that up for long; as the wind grew colder and the snow continued to fall, he was forced to the ground, and he began to wade through the snowdrifts that were quickly building. No longer could they follow the path of those who had left before them due to the snow wiping out the trail. The only positive side of this was that they also didn't have to worry about being followed.

"Cecil, we should stop!" Alexa shouted up at him when she eventually saw that he was nearly up to his hips in snow. And around them, hills rose so high that their tops were hidden in the near complete darkness of the blizzard. "We're going to freeze if we stay out here like this!"

He shook his head. "I have to get to Reshiram before anyone else. If this storm is slowing up all those other pokémon, then this is my chance to pull ahead."

"This is crazy!" Alexa said as she realized that her injured wing was completely numb. Even at the cost of slowing its healing, she

needed to get it out of its splint and tuck it against her body, where she could keep it warm. Otherwise, she didn't doubt that her wing would freeze and be forevermore completely useless. "My wing is freezing - my whole body is freezing! And you've gotta be the same, I mean, you're a bug! You don't even have feathers to keep you warm like I've got! We have to stop!"

He didn't respond.

"Do you *want* us to die?"

Cecil finally stopped and, without looking down at her, said. "That's the last thing I want."

"Then let's stop and try to get out of this blizzard already!" Alexa said.

He nodded. "I'll see if I can dig a hole in the snow to get us out of the worst of it. That's what they always did in the movies." He set Alexa carefully down, her light body not so much as making a dent in the deep snow beneath her. She puffed her feathers up and watched as Cecil used the edges of his blades to scoop snow away from the hillside next to them. Alexa expect his blades to hit the hill itself at any time, but as he went deeper and deeper until the hole was big enough that his whole body could fit inside, she realized that this wasn't a snow-covered hill at all. Rather, the hill itself was a giant drift, as were all the swells of snow that rose around them.

"All right, get inside," Cecil called to her from within the impromptu den. "It's actually pretty warm."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Alexa said through her chattering beak as she hopped inside. She nearly sighed with relief once she was in; compared to the constant wind and falling snow outside, this little hovel was a warm paradise. As a human, it still probably wouldn't have done much good, and she wouldn't have liked her chances at survival. But as a pidgey, she wasn't so concerned.

Still, her worries were far from gone.

"Better?" Cecil asked after some time sitting in the darkness of their hole.

"I… I can't feel my wing," she said, the horror of the thought bubbling up inside her. "I still can't feel it." She had hoped that warming up would be enough to reverse the cold, but maybe the wing was already too far gone. The pain of the broken bone was gone, but that was little consolation when facing the possibility of her wing never being functional again.

She couldn't see his reaction in the dark, but heard concern even in his usual flat voice as he said, "We need to warm it up. Quickly."

"Cut off the splint, then," she said quietly. "Be careful, though."

Despite being unable to see, he nonetheless wielded his blades even in this cramped space with precision, cutting through the weedle silk and nothing more.

"It's off."

She hadn't even realized; all sensation was gone in the wing. All of it. Still fearful, she said, "Fold it against my side. I can't… I can't do it. I can't feel anything."

He did as he was told, maneuvering her wing into position with delicacy surprising from a pokémon with two scythes for arms. Without her asking, he then emptied out the bag he still had with him, then put the cloth over her body, with the thickest bit of it on the right side of her body on top of her numb wing. And then, to top it all off, she felt him huddle against her, so that the wing had at least some source of heat on each side.

It might have been her imagination, but she thought she felt the slightest bit of warmth returning to the seemingly dead wing. But that

wasn't enough. She was still terrified for herself, enough so that she even let a tear or two leak out of her eyes.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen! I was supposed to find Cecil, and we were gonna be friends again, and we could travel this world or whatever, but not like this! My wing probably would've gone pretty much back to normal from just being broken, but this? Is it really so far gone that I'll never be able to use it, because that's what it feels like!

With her good wing, she wiped away the tears. She hated the tears, hated any sign of weakness. She liked being someone who could hold in her feelings, her fears, her worries, and she respected other people who had that same strength even though she knew from Cecil that she'd often tried to pry into their business anyway. It was why she'd been drawn to Cecil when they'd both been humans. He'd been stronger than anyone she'd ever known, and even then he constantly sought greater strength.

She had always admired that strength, but now, she hated it more than anything else. "Why in the world did you have to follow Reshiram, anyway? He's going to destroy you before you can so much as scratch him! And now, because of your stupid quest to be the biggest bully in the pokémon world, I have a wing that may never work again!"

Defensive now, he responded, "I'm sorry, all right? I didn't know this would happen. I wasn't thinking."

"You say that, but I don't even know if I can believe it!" Alexa shouted at him, panicked beyond reason. "Maybe you've been wanting to cripple me all this time! Maybe you really are just another bully now, and you want someone around who has to depend on you! Because that's how it is now, isn't it? I can't leave without worrying about freezing to death or being found by Kyurem's followers, and yet you keep on moving on into even colder places with even more enemies! Are you *trying* to hurt me? Trying to destroy my life, everything that I've suddenly discovered and loved in this world?"

"No, that's not it! That's not it at all!" Cecil insisted, his voice raising to match Alexa's.

"Then why? Why do you insist on going on this suicidal chase?" Alexa asked. "And why bring me along? I guess if you can't survive it, then you want to take me down with you, is that it?"

"No! I'd never-"

"Or maybe you just don't want anyone telling the world that you weren't always such a murderous Arceus-forsaken devil! I bet that's it, am I right?"

"Alexa, no, I don't care about what anyone else in this world thinks about me, that's not what matters!" Cecil said. "There's only one thing that's ever mattered to me since waking up, and that's why-"

"And what the hell is that, huh?" Alexa said. "What is it that's so important that you'll throw away other pokémon's lives, and your own life, and even mine?"

She felt him tense next to her, as if ready to jump to his feet in their cramped dark space. "I don't throw away anyone's life! Especially not yours!"

"Then why kill? Why risk both of our lives right now with this stupid chase?" Alexa said.

"You really want to know?" he said, his voice quieting ever so slightly as his anger was infected by a new, more somber seriousness.

"Yes! Yes I do, that's why I'm asking!" Alexa shouted back, not detecting his new mood.

There was a pause in the flow of conversation as Cecil took a breath and quelled his anger. "It's going to sound stupid. But ever since I woke up here, I've just felt like at one point in my life, I tried to protect someone, but failed. Like even though it seems like I

remember everything about my human life, there's something important missing, and in that missing part is a moment that makes me angry at myself just to think about how much I screwed up. Okay? That's why I've been fighting so hard, why I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I held back. Because I know that there was some point in time when, even when I didn't hold back, I still wasn't strong enough to save something."

The scared fury that had been filling Alexa drained out of her completely as she practically froze in place, pinned down suddenly by an overwhelming feeling of guilt. Her right wing was beginning to thrum with widespread pain as it finally began to thaw, but she ignored it. Or, rather, she didn't even notice it; if she did, she almost certainly would've preferred to focus on that rather than the self-loathing flooding through her now.

"So? Say something," Cecil said when she didn't respond. "Tell me I'm stupid. I know what I've become. I've known for some time, but I'd never admit it due to that stupid feeling that I needed to get stronger, so I'd be able to protect that something. Just say it. I'm a bully, a killer. I never stopped myself, never repented, just kept on soaking my hands in blood. I even hurt you without even realizing who you were! Even more than the killings, that thought makes me feel terrible."

"Shut up," Alexa said suddenly, quietly, almost as if she herself didn't realize she was saying it.

Even in the darkness, she could feel his glare as he said, "What do you mean, shut up? I finally had the guts to tell you how stupid I've been, and you tell me to shut up?"

"Just shut up!" she shouted. She couldn't stand it. She'd always gone through life carelessly, without really worrying; now, so much guilt filled her that she could barely breathe, her airways closing up in panic. "It's all been a lie, hasn't it? You were just waiting for this moment! Just trying to make me guilty, you've just been pretending you didn't remember to make me feel worse! Isn't that right!"

"What? I don't know-"

"Just be quiet!" she said as she quickly hopped away, cramming herself as far away from him as she could in these tight quarters. "I'm sorry, all right! I'm sorry for what happened, I feel terrible about it, because it was all my fault! Okay, I admit it, I'm sorry! Is that what you've been waiting to here? That why you've pretended you didn't have a clue about that day, even when you remembered everything else? Have you just been waiting for me to admit to my sins?"

Alexa ran out of breath at the same time her train of thought ended, leaving her only with emotions that her words couldn't even begin to describe.

In another moment, Cecil spoke up. "Yesterday, you mentioned some stuff from the one day you remember. I thought I didn't remember it because it was just another average day. It wasn't, was it?" His voice was accusatory.

"No, it wasn't, okay? It was *the* day. Our last day living there, before I messed everything up just by being stupid!" Alexa was practically in hysterics now. The cold, the rising pain, the stress of her wing being possibly unusable, this sudden and huge wave of guilt - it was all just too much, even for someone who'd always considered herself a strong individual.

"What happened, Alexa?" Cecil asked, his voice still low and angry. "What am I forgetting?"

"We *died*, all right! We died, and it was all my stupid fault!" Alexa shouted. "I didn't mean for it to happen, it was supposed to be a stupid myth, nothing should've been out there! It never should have happened!"

"Just tell me what happened, Alexa."

Alexa took a breath, but it did little to calm her as she began. "It was a pretty normal day, like I said. All six of us friends went to the mall,

saw a movie. Ate some frozen yogurt afterwards. It was a good day, you know? We were all back for the summer, and it was one of the few days where we were all able to get off work at once. It should've been great. I should've been satisfied with that, but I wasn't. You remember that stupid myth of Lacunosa? No one would ever go outside, not at night. Even with the walls up to keep out whatever monster they thought it was, no one would leave. Not even other people our age. Sure, people always claimed that they had been outside at night, that they never let it frighten them, and maybe a couple people had really been out there in the dark. But usually it was just dead at night. I always thought it was ridiculous. I wanted out at night."

Her sentences continued to race each other, running into one another as she continued frantically, "I just wanted to have some fun, right? I didn't want the day to end. I wanted to stay out that night. Tried to convince everyone to just keep on hanging out. Everyone backed out, said they had to get back home. Everyone except you. You decided to stay with me on a little night adventure through Lacunosa. I thought the others were scaredy-meowths, that you and I were the only people who had any sense. We joked about it. I think I heard you talk more that night than I'd ever heard you talk before - when we were in our big group of friends, you always let other people do the talking. We just… talked. And…"

We did more than just talk, she thought to herself, recalling the happy memory. *I don't know exactly how it happened, or why then at that moment, but we kissed, too. But I can't tell him that. He doesn't even remember it; I'd be reminding him of one night's choice that he doesn't even remember. Manipulating him, trying to make him feel that way again. Or maybe I'd be trying to justify us being all alone that night, and I can't do that.*

"Then it all went to hell." Her voice was suddenly quiet, and deathly calm. *We were kissing, and…* "A cold north wind suddenly blew. It was the middle of summer, the night had been balmy just a second ago. We hear something, like giant footsteps in the night, and we

hear something like breathing. We could see our breath in the air, that's how cold it suddenly was. We looked down the street and… And there it was. Just standing there at the end of the street, yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness, ice-"

"-ice spreading out around it," Cecil finished for her.

Alexa jerked her head towards him, even though neither of them could see the other in this darkness. "So you did remember."

"No, I didn't. Not until now," Cecil said. "That… that thing. It came after us, didn't it? We ran. I tried to draw it off, push you down an alleyway while I drew the thing off. It almost worked, but… it turned around after a few steps my direction and followed you instead. I was… I was too slow. I couldn't get there in time. I watched as you froze solid, saw it rip you apart, and I couldn't do anything. And then it came for me, and I still couldn't do anything. Didn't even hit it, didn't even get it back for what it did to you. That's what I've felt so bad about all this time. We… We finally admitted it, didn't we? That night? Finally admitted that we liked each other, or that we wanted to like each other, after all that time. And then…" He let out a frustrated shout as he slammed one of his scythes into the snowy wall; Alexa heard the crunching swish as it cut through the crystals of ice. "Why? Why did it have to happen then?"

Alexa shook her head. "I don't know. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I never should have-"

"It's not your fault. Not at all," Cecil interrupted her. "That night - to be honest, it just made me like you more. If anything, it sort of clenched it. I'd sort of been interested in you the previous summer, and Austin and Nathan and Andrew all sort of encouraged it. They all said that you'd liked me for a while, even though you'd been dating other guys. And you were single that summer, and I was sort of thinking about it more, and then you wanted to stay out that night, do what no one else ever had the guts to do. I came out and said it, and then… and then that had to happen. I'd loved martial arts all my life, loved fighting all my life, and yet I couldn't do a thing."

"If I can't blame myself, then you can't either!" Alexa said, finally hopping back over to Cecil's side, half running into him in the process; light was finally starting to filter through what little bit of the opening hadn't been covered by the blizzard, but it was still quite dark. "The town had its myths, but no one could've expected what happened, right?" Suddenly, the guilt was dissipating. Whether it was just being able to talk about it, or to know that Cecil felt just as bad about it as she did, or perhaps just the fact that she finally felt like she was with *him* - not Edge the scyther, but Cecil the human.

"That thing, that monster… It was Kyurem, wasn't it?" Cecil asked. "The monster of Lacunosa legend was never named, but they said it came down in a meteor to earth…"

"… just like what Thundurus, Landorus, and Tornadus said about the Kyurem here," Alexa said, catching on. "And all this cold, this ice that's eating the land - it's a lot like the cold we felt that night. Don't you think?"

He nodded, then slammed his scythe into the wall yet again, nearly bringing down the roof of their little shelter. "I hate it! That Kyurem… Right when you and me had finally found something good together. Now we don't even know if it would've really worked out, because our lives ended before we even got a chance to really live."

Alexa took sharp breath. Her wing was really starting to ache now as feeling returned to it and vessels broken by frozen blood regained sensation. But she didn't want Cecil to worry about her, not now that he'd remembered everything. Not now. So before he could ask what was wrong, she said, "But it doesn't matter now. There's no point in fighting Kyurem… I mean, you're a scyther now and I'm a pidgey. There's no way around that, no matter how much we fight. And you said it yourself: you like fighting so much more here than back there. We'll probably just have to go our separate ways."

Always wondering… What if? What if that monster hadn't attacked, what if we'd stayed together as humans? Maybe I'm stupid, and idealistic. I've felt this way about guys before, and then it never

worked out. But unlike them, Cecil started out as a friend, and it grew into more than that, I think. It wasn't a stupid decision, just falling for a random guy who asked me out or did a thing or two to woo me. We can still be together here, maybe form a team…

… but it's not the same.

"We could still be together. Like, really together," Cecil said, purposefully looking in the other direction. "If we found a way to go back home. To become humans again."

Alexa jerked her head up to look at him, surprised. "But you said that you didn't want to go back, didn't you? I mean, I'll be honest… Being a pokémon seems perfect for you. You like to fight, and as a pokémon, you can do that better than ever. Even if we could go back…"

This time, it was Cecil's turn to give Alexa a surprised glance. "Are you saying you're considering it? I didn't really think you would… You said you liked flying too much, right? And even if your wing is pretty banged up, it's getting feeling back now, right? And pokémon heal incredibly well. I bet your wing will be back completely to normal in a couple months, tops. And if we could find a skilled audino or chansey somewhere, you could even be back in the sky sooner, maybe even immediately - perhaps not with the same mobility or stamina quite yet. But you're saying… I mean, you'd want to go back?"

The tips of her feathers burned with embarrassment as she looked down at the ground and said, "I'd miss flying, sure… But I miss our friends back home, too. And I thought if you'd want to go back with me, if we could just find out how it would've worked out between us. Even if it doesn't work out… Well, I think it'd be worth it, just to know for sure, not have this uncertainty."

As tenderly as possible, Cecil placed a scythe on Alexa's back. The gesture was so different from what it would've been back when they were humans - what with her being so small, and it being a deadly blade instead of a warm arm - yet that feeling of support, of care still

came across loud and clear. "I guess that settles it, then," Cecil said. "The guilds know the most about what's going on, right? We'll continue on to the Northern Guild, I'll hope they can forgive me for what I've done, and then we'll do whatever it takes to get back to our human lives, if there's a way at all to return to them."

Alexa snuggled a little closer, not caring that doing so made tears come out of her eyes - this time, not tears of emotion, but tears of pain. She was gasping a bit now, constantly taking sharp breaths, her talons clenching the snow beneath her as hard as they could. Even then, though, she tried to fight it off and bite back the pain. "Sounds like a plan," she said eventually.

They sat there in silence for a time, with Alexa just focusing on not letting the pain get to her and Cecil no doubt not wanting to heighten her pain by immediately starting out for the Northern Guild now that it was light out.

But soon enough, Alexa noticed a change in him. His body suddenly tensed, and he looked towards the pokéball-sized hole that remained of the entrance.

"What is i-"

"Shh!" he hushed her, though not unkindly. Then, in a low voice, he said, "There's someone out there."

She listened and, before long, she heard footsteps in the snow, as well as someone's voice. "I swear, someone's around here. I can smell them."

"And where exactly would they be hiding?" another voice asked. "Unless they got buried under all this snow. And we aren't going to get any sort of reward or praise for finding dead bodies, no matter if they're that human or not."

"Just give me a minute, and I'll find them. The scent's faint, but they're definitely around her somewhere."

"Well, if you do find her, it's convenient she showed up around here, right?" a third voice said. "Just a day or two walk to the Northern Guild. We won't even have to strain ourselves! And once we do that, maybe we'll even get to meet Kyurem himself!"

Alexa and Cecil looked at one another as they heard the footsteps get closer and closer; the glance they exchanged showed that both of them knew they'd be found eventually if they stayed there. Cecil motioned to the stick and weedle silk that up until a few hours ago had been the splint for Alexa's wing, but she shook her head at him when he tried to pick it up.

I'd rather risk the bone getting offset again than possibly get more frostbite. I'll keep my wing right where it is, up against the side of my body.

When Cecil saw he couldn't convince her otherwise for whatever reason, he dropped his attempts concerning the splint. He picked up his bag and put it over a shoulder, then held out one of his scythes for her to jump on, a gesture Alexa had gotten quite used to over the past couple days. She didn't ask questions and jumped on immediately; when it came to confrontation, she trusted Cecil to know what he was doing.

"There! That's where the smell's coming from! That hole!"

The footsteps came closer and closer, and Edge tensed. Alexa saw a shadow pass over the hole, then someone stuck his head in to look-

-and then Edge was off, slicing at them with his free scythe as he burst out right past them, opening his wings as soon as he was out and flying as fast as he could over the drifts.

"Oi! Get back here! You aren't allowed to just wander around Kyurem's territory and attack us like that!" shouted the mightyena in the group, who now had a heavily bleeding scratch stretching from right above his eye to further down his neck.

"Hey, those aren't just any pokémon!" a sealeo said as she and a jynx followed after the mightyena. "There's no way it can be coincidence - there's a pidgey and a scyther that are both humans!"

"Well isn't this our lucky day!" the jynx said. "Now get back here!"

A powder snow attack hit them from behind, but they were already a ways away. Since he could fly, he could skip straight over the tall dunes of snow while the pursuers had to slog through the drifts.

"Not going to fight this time?" Alexa asked.

He let out a chuckle. "Nah, because now I know who I was wanting to protect all this time. It'd be stupid if I fought now, only to get you captured, wouldn't it?"

Despite the pain, Alexa chuckled as well. "I wouldn't *need* protecting if you hadn't injured me so much in the first place. Besides, you're really just running because you know that a bug and flying type like yourself would get demolished by two ice types coming at you at once."

He didn't respond to her playful goading, instead changing the subject. "Sounds like the Northern Guild is out of the question. Back to the Western Guild, then? Can your wing hold out that long?"

"Seems like it'll have to, because I'd lose both my wings before having anything to do with that monster Kyurem or anyone who follows it. Western Guild it is!"

Guys, this has nothing to do with this story, but guess what? I just watched Doctor Who (series 1 or whatever, the one with the 9th Doctor, Eccleston), and it was MARVELOUS. And I honestly can't wait to watch more. Seriously, if you've never seen it, go to your local library or whatever and check it out. SO MANY FEELS.

Anyway, yeah. Guess who's finally essentially on the side of good now? These two! Not like they were ever truly evil to begin with… Okay, maybe Cecil was. Not evil evil, but like… yeah. You get what I'm saying. Btw, Lacunosa Town is just a creepy place. I wouldn't live there unless I wanted to constantly be in fear of some giant meteor monster. And at this point, I'm just rambling. :)

Hope you're enjoying the story!

Chapter 28: Team Misfits

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Team Misfits

"Um, mind if I come in?"

Isola awoke from the less-than-restful nap she'd been taking and, before even glancing at the doorway to see who had spoken, she looked through the thick, rock-hewn bars that split this guild room in two. To her relief, she saw in the torchlight of the windowless room that Cody was still trapped on the other side, his continued attempts to attack the bars and walls having done nothing. But to her disappointment, he was still the same vicious, icy linoone as before, with not so much as a hint of the real Cody showing through his wild eyes.

Only once she was sure of his current status did she turn to the doorway, at first expecting it to be Lisa or Ryan, both of whom had dropped in as often as possible these last few days since Cody's capture. Lisa still wasn't happy with Isola for continuing to avoid missions in order to stay at Cody's side constantly, yet Isola adamantly insisted on staying. Ryan mostly backed Isola's decision, yet she could tell that in the last day or two his concern for her both her mental and physical health was growing.

Yet the pokémon who stood in the doorway now was neither of them, nor was it one of the guards who stood constantly just outside the room. Isola blinked once or twice at the sight of the archen entering the room, thinking at first that maybe she was still in the middle of some lucid dream.

"Max?" she asked when she finally decided to believe her eyes. "But I thought… Well, I didn't think you'd even be allowed out of your guild. Not after what's happened with Cody, and with Vulpix and all."

Max grinned a bit sheepishly. "Technically, I ran away before they could say anything differently… But I do have my guildmasters' permission now! I'm traveling with some friends, hoping to maybe do… I dunno, something. Zeke and Kara and Team FireFang are all talking to other pokémon here at your guild, catching up on exactly all we've missed over the last few days. But I thought I'd come down here. But still, I heard… Reshiram's been awoken, hasn't he?"

Isola nodded. "No one's really sure what happened, since Vulpix hasn't been found yet. But… The most I've heard of are unconfirmed reports of Reshiram rampaging in the North. Most of the Western Guild is still out trying to catch Vulpix, so maybe we'll know something once they find her… I do hope she's okay, though. She seemed really nice at the Solstice Games."

"I thought she seemed nice, too… But if Kyurem's really taken control of her like everyone's been saying, then being nice doesn't have anything to do with it," Max said with a sigh.

They were both silent for a while, until one of Cody's headbutt attacks to the wall hit with an exceptionally solid thump.

"So, is this all he does?" Max asked. "He doesn't attack you while you stay in here?"

"No. He just keeps on trying to get out, all day and all night," she replied sadly. "But they say that Guildmaster Elgyem and Terrakion are the only ones who can open and close the door, like it's magic or something. Or maybe they're the only ones strong enough to move it." With her head, she gestured to the right side of the bars, where a thick slab of stone covered the only entrance into and out of the cage.

Max looked at the giant stone, then turned his eyes back to Isola. "You know, the reason why I left the guild… I don't want to just hide anymore. I want to actually try to do something to help the world, you know? Now that I've heard about Reshiram, I think that after this I'll go off looking for him, and for Vulpix. But for now, as long as I'm

here, I'm not even sure if it'll work, but I'd like to try to wake up Cody. Get rid of Kyurem's influence. Because so far, only me and Cody and Vulpix have been able to do it, and that means I'm the only one who can help him right now."

For a moment, Isola couldn't quite comprehend Max's words, and she continued staring at him just the same as before, as if he was still talking. Then, as understanding dawned on her, she got to her feet and walked over to him, new hope shining in her eyes. "Really? You'll try?"

"I can't guarantee anything since I don't really know how it works myself, but I'll try," Max said. "Of course, that'll mean attacking him… You okay with that?"

Isola nodded resolutely.

"You sure these bars won't break if I accidentally hit them while attacking?" Max asked. "I'd go in and fight him, but the bars are too narrow to squeeze through, and…" he trailed off. Isola guessed that he just didn't want to put himself in danger, and she couldn't blame him. Cody as he was now was not a pokémon to be taken lightly.

"I'm sure," Isola said. "He's been attacking the bars all the time and they haven't so much as chipped. The cage will hold."

He gave her a nod of acknowledgement, then stepped up to the bars. For the first time since Max's entrance into the room, Cody looked up and noticed him, and for a moment just glared at him. Then, rather than return to his usual pacing of his cage and attacking any perceived weak points, he launched himself at the bars just in front of Max with new fury, as if trying to reach the archen in front of him.

Max looked at Isola, a bit of concern in his eyes. "I though he didn't pay attention to anyone out here?"

"I don't know. He hasn't until now. Maybe because you're human, too, and Kyurem is after humans?"

"Maybe," Max said as he turned back to the cage, flinching as the linoone slammed into the bars. "At least he's not using ice beam or anything else ranged… I guess this is my best shot at getting him, since he's coming so close. I'll give it a try."

Max waited as Cody hit the bars a few more times, then timed a dragonbreath right as the linoone made his next impact, the purplish flames washing over Cody and sending him reeling backwards.

Max seemed almost surprised at himself when he cut off the attack. "That's the strongest I've been able to do it… Well, since the Solstice Games, at least, but I was really desperate then."

"Don't stop now!" Isola said, her eyes intently trained on Cody, who seemed stunned for a moment. From anyone else, she didn't think an attack of the strength would've made Cody even pause in his attacks. Max's dragonbreath was certainly doing *something,* even if Isola couldn't say with certainty what that something was.

"Oh, right!" Max said as Cody soon recovered and threw himself at the bars again. Again Max attacked right as Cody hit, this time with an ancientpower.

The attack was powerful, but not extremely so, at least not against the extreme endurance this ice-cloaked Cody had already shown himself to possess. And yet, it still seemed to be doing the trick. Cody stayed down longer this time. When he did get up after maybe a minutes, there were a few seconds where he looked around, confused; and in those few seconds, Isola swore she saw the real Cody looking out of those eyes.

Again, the linoone threw himself against the bars, and once again Max attacked, this time with another, even more powerful dragonbreath. Isola wasn't sure what had caused this sudden increase in power - perhaps his confidence was building as he saw

the effect he was having on Cody. Whatever the reason, Isola didn't care. What mattered were the results, and so far, the results were promising.

Cody stayed down for another moment before once again launching himself at the bars. But this time, his movements were sluggish, enough to suggest that Max's barrage of attacks were taking more of a toll than perhaps they should have. Holding back for just a moment, Max just watched this time as Cody headbutted the bars one last time before collapsing to the ground.

Isola, who had been standing back, now rushed forward and looked at Cody with a mix of concern and hope.

"I shouldn't have done *that* much damage," Max said, looking at the linoone worriedly. "Even Cody the zigzagoon should still be conscious after just three attacks."

"It might be… He hasn't even rested at all these past few days," Isola said. "Maybe you've broken Kyurem's hold on him, so now his exhaustion is catching up to him."

Though her head was too big to fit through the narrow gap between the bars, she managed to slip her beak through and poke him. Even that little touch was enough to send a chill racing through her body, and enough to wake him up, if only for a moment. Like before, Isola thought she saw just a moment of clarity, as if it really was Cody in the linoone body and not some malignant presence.

But then that moment of clarity was gone. He rammed his shoulder against the bars right as Isola managed to withdraw his beak, and then he immediately collapsed again.

Max seemed to droop in response. "I'm sorry… I really thought I might be able to help."

"No, thank you, really," she said sincerely, turning to him. "I think you did… something, at the least. He's not trying to get out anymore, and

maybe Kyurem's control over him really is breaking."

"I just hope I didn't hurt him too much…"

Isola smiled, just a bit. "He'll whine about it if he wakes up, but he's tougher than he thinks he is."

Max brightened a bit. "Well, I think that's the most I can do… I think I'm going to find my team now so we can head out before it gets any later in the afternoon. Take care, Doduo - of both yourself, and Cody. I bet somewhere deep down, he really appreciates it."

Before he could leave, she said, "You can call me Isola."

Max smiled. "Well, Isola, best of luck with getting that friend of yours to come to his senses."

Isola watched Max as he left, then quickly turned her attention back to Cody. Hope was still surging in her - she didn't know how, but she thought for sure that Max must've made progress. Maybe there was something she could do to build on that, to bring back the Cody she remembered.

She sat down next to the cage and once again poked her beak through the bars and touched it to Cody's side. The cold once again flooded through her, but this time he didn't wake up. She held her beak there for minutes on end, even when she felt her beak going numb from contact with the icy fur. But still he didn't stir. He stayed where he was, his breathing shallow and his body otherwise completely still.

After a while, Isola withdrew her beak. She could see that her touch was doing nothing for him, and she was worried about wasting time. She didn't know if maybe he'd wake up and go back to trying to escape, if she waited too long. She wanted to stop that from happening if she could.

She was slowly losing the hope that Max's arrival had inspired in her, but she nonetheless tried the last thing she could think of, the only thing that at the very least would make her feel like she was trying to wake him up, rather than just sitting and waiting for his inevitable return to his earlier behavior.

"You know, I've always had it rough. I don't necessarily complain about it, but I had it a lot rougher than Lisa or Ryan," Isola began, speaking low enough so that the pokémon standing guard outside couldn't hear. "Lisa never really had a bad life - after all, the only thing wrong with her was that she was born a twin in a species that only has room for one infant at a time. Ryan… Well, sure, his family hated him. But they were the only minccino he lived around, and so they were the only ones who really cast him out. He still had lots of friends who didn't mind him being a bit dirty.

"But I've always had it rough. Doduo and dodrio live in herds, and so I was surrounded only by pokémon who saw me as deformed. The few who didn't tease me still would have nothing to do with me. My mom… I think she pitied me more than she loved me. She tried, really she did, but she didn't know how to deal with a one-headed child. And as if that all wasn't bad enough, having only one head had very real effects on me and how I could function. For as long as I can remember, I never had a good night's sleep, never felt truly safe. I'm hardwired to have that second head, that head that's still you, yet not you - like the best of friends you could have, who thinks exactly the same way you do, who could be your company even when everyone else shuns you, who would swap sleeping shifts with you so that you could sleep feeling safe… I never had anything like that, yet I always felt like I should.

"I left the herd after a while, but there was still nothing I could do about the sleep, and the fear. I met Ryan and Lisa one day while they were out on a mission, and they immediately recruited me. Didn't even ask why I didn't have a second head, just told me I should join they're team. I did, and… Things got better, if just a bit. Maybe I was still paranoid, maybe my sleep was still not great. But I

at least enjoyed myself, and I even got better at battling. I had something to be proud of, and I felt like a part of something."

She was so caught up in her story and trying to make Cody hear it that she didn't even see Cody move for the first time since collapsing. It wasn't anything big - just a twitch of the ear. Oblivious to this, Isola continued on, "And then you came. That first day, you didn't even know I was supposed to have a second head. You were the first pokémon to look at me and not see me for my deformity. Even Ryan and Lisa can't claim they didn't notice. They wouldn't have let me onto their team otherwise. And you know, right from the start, I believed what you said about you being human. Cody and Lisa took a little bit more convincing, but for some reason, I didn't think you were lying, even though the idea of you being human was crazy."

Both of Cody's ears twitched, and this time they stayed upright, as if listening intently. Isola still didn't see the small movement.

"It happened gradually, enough so that I didn't notice it at first. No one noticed it at first, I think. But… Well, with you around, I stopped feeling like I was missing that part of me. You weren't particularly protective of me, and we were really different, and you didn't look out for me any more than you did for Lisa and Ryan, and yet it still felt that way - like I had that second head. You know, right before you were captured, when we were still looking for Keldeo on his island, you asked me if I liked you… I said I didn't know, and I honestly didn't. Not then. I still don't know for sure, at least not in that sense. But I do know that I like you more than I've ever liked anyone before, and probably more than I'll ever like anyone period. You whine and complain and you want to go back to a place where I know I couldn't possibly follow you, but so long as that's what you want, I'm okay with it. Because… I just want you to be yourself again!"

Isola heard something, and for the first time since beginning to talk, she noticed that Cody was not as completely still as he once had been. His whole body was tensed as he doubled up on himself, as if in pain or trapped in some horrible nightmare.

"Cody! Cody, are you all right?" Isola said to him, alternately worried and filled with hope. On one hand, perhaps everything had been too much - the exhaustion, Max's attacks. Perhaps his body couldn't take it any more. He could be shutting down completely. But perhaps this was Cody, the real Cody, fighting off the monster currently possessing him.

Against all odds, Isola put all her belief into the latter of those two possibilities.

"Cody, fight him off and wake up!" she said. "Please! Me and Ryan and Lisa - we're all ready to get you back!" And in one last attempt at doing what before had had no effect, she reached through the bars and touched her beak to his fur.

She felt the coldness again, but only for a moment. Then she felt only warmth as she watched the linoone in front of her literally fade away, the icy fur and claws evaporating into thin air and leaving only a zigzagoon lying there on the ground, his body completely still.

"Cody!" she shouted, fear and hope alternately coursing through her. He looked so dead, and yet-

He stirred and, slowly, he managed to lift up his head and look around a bit before his eyes settled on Isola. "What happened to me?" he asked, his eyes half-lidded as he let his head drop back to the ground in exhaustion, though he continued to look up at Isola now that he'd seen her. "I feel like I've been run over by a herd of cattle, and trust me, I know what that feels like - it's half of what killed me back when I was a human."

"Cody, you're back, and you're you again!" Isola exclaimed, then turned away from Cody for a moment to yell to the guards outside the room, "Guys, go get Guildmaster Elgyem! We've gotta let Cody out, he's back to normal!"

The two pokémon looked into the room quickly, but at Isola's urging hurried out once again.

"Wait, let me out…? Why am I in one of the guild's cells?" Cody asked as he groggily pushed himself to his feet. "And you said I'm me agai- Oh, God, that's right. Emma caught me."

"Do you not remember any of it?" Isola asked.

Cody scrunched up his eyes as he thought. "Not at first. I guess… Someone was talking to me. Kyurem, probably. Offered me something, but I refused, and then he took control and I for sure don't remember anything after that, except what happened inside my head. I just sort of fought for a while, and then I sort of gave up for a long time since I wasn't doing any good. But at some point… I dunno, it wasn't so much that the control was weaker. In fact, it felt stronger than ever. But it was less stable. I can remember glimpses of what I was doing… Just this place, mostly, but another where there were lots of pokémon fighting outside the guild. It was dark out."

Isola nodded, and though she could still barely get over how happy she was to see him as himself again, she still managed to say, "You and Emma both followed the Northern Guild when they came to attack us here - most of them are still here now. It turns out Guildmaster Abomasnow is on Kyurem's side, too, maybe willingly. We caught you when it happened, but Emma managed to summon Zekrom and get away."

"After that… Well, I don't remember anything until it really felt like the control on me was breaking over time. Maybe not any weaker than before, but becoming more and more unstable. Eventually, it almost felt like it was being attacked," Cody said.

"Max came not too long ago, and he attacked you, hoping it would help," Isola said.

"Well, I can't say I appreciate the soreness… Though from the bits I can remember, that might be due to me throwing myself at the walls more than his attacks. I'm still blaming him, though," Cody said. "And then, just after that, just now… I was really fighting the control in my

head since it was breaking up, and then I heard everything you were saying, and I pushed all the harder." He had his ears folded against his head now, clearly embarrassed. "Thanks for that, Isola. I'm not sure if I would've made it otherwise."

Isola smiled a reached her beak through the bars once more, touching him on the nose. "I'm just glad you're all right."

Cody smiled back. "And about what you were saying… Well, I'm glad I get the honor of being your replacement head. Figuratively speaking, of course."

Isola laughed, her first real laugh in days.

"And about me ever leaving to be a human again… I think you can rest easy. I don't think it can happen," Cody said, not at all unhappily. "I mean, I *died* there. I don't know if that's what happened to any of the other humans, but I definitely died. And people don't just come back from the dead. And even if I could go back, I'm not sure if I want to anymore. I mean, I don't know either way, it's so hard to think about. I miss my real family, true… But you and Lisa and Ryan have become just as much a family to me. But don't tell Ryan and Lisa I said that."

"It'll be our secret," Isola said, just as the both of them heard footsteps running down the hallway outside. They turned to the entrance just in time to see the other half of their team enter the room, both out of breath.

"Big trouble, Isola," Ryan said as he caught his breath, apparently not even seeing Cody. "The guild's surrounded by-" he cut himself off as his eyes drifted past Isola and to Cody.

Lisa looked at him questioningly for a moment. "What's wrong? Not that out of breath just from a little run, are you?"

"Cody, you're back to your dopey zigzagoon self!" Ryan said as he ran forward, right up to Isola's side. Though he was trying to act like

his usual casual self, a lot more feeling and concern was audible in his voice. "You *are* back to normal, right?"

Cody let out a disgruntled puff of air, but he couldn't possibly hide the smile growing on his face. "Well, I'm not dopey, but yes, it's me!"

"About time!" Lisa said as she ran up to Isola's other side. "You had Isola all worried, and it was starting to really annoy me that I only had Ryan for backup on missions! Not like I need any backup or anything, but really, took you long enough, idiot!"

Cody turned his back to them and took a couple of steps away from them, as if angry. "Well, if I'm just going to wake up after being mind controlled only to you guys insulting me, then maybe it'd be best for me to stay in here."

"Actually, you might be right."

Everyone - even Lisa - jumped a bit at the sudden new voice in the conversation, and turned to see that Guildmaster Elgyem had showed up in a corner of the room.

"Sheesh, Guildmaster, don't just teleport into the conversation like that!" Ryan said. "We're all gonna die of shock one of these days!"

"You'll get over it," Lisa said, not wanting to admit that she herself had been surprised.

"My apologies," Guildmaster Elgyem said, "But I have no time to waste time. We're in a bit of a crisis, and I'm quite serious about it being safer for you to stay in there, Cody" Guildmaster Elgyem said, his voice completely composed. "Our guild is completely surrounded, all our water and large aerial exits have been sealed off by ice, and we have a large group of pokémon threatening the safety of both this guild and the Western Guild if we don't comply with their demands."

"And those demands are what?" Isola asked, though the half defensive, half angry look on her face hinted that she had at least

some idea.

"Give up Cody."

Lisa slammed her tail into one of the bars angrily. "Over my dead body!"

"I quite agree with that sentiment, Kangaskhan, which is why I suggest Cody stay in here for now, in the event we are unsuccessful in escaping… However, I will be needing the rest of Team Misfits, as well as every able-bodied guildmember, so come-"

"Hey, Guildmaster, don't just leave me here!" Cody said before Elgyem could finish his sentence and teleport away.

I might've just followed my team up until now, going along with whatever they suggested… But now, I'm not just going to sit back, even if I'm given the opportunity. I'm angry at Kyurem, and I'll go to hell before I let him have his way with me or this world or anyone else in it anymore.

"I'm sore and tired and hungry, but I'm not gonna sit down here while the rest of my team fights," Cody said as he got to his feet. "I want to help out, too."

Guildmaster Elgyem looked at Cody for just a moment, and without any change of expression said, "Very well, but I do expect you to refrain from being captured yet again."

"As if we'd *let* him, no matter how much he hates us," Ryan said with a big grin on his face.

Elgyem nodded, turned to the slab of rock that served as the cage's door, and with what seemed like an enormous amount of effort managed to telekinetically shift it to the side, just enough for Cody to squeeze out. Immediately, Isola, Ryan, and even Lisa crowded around him.

"Glad to have you back, Cody," Lisa said, speaking for everyone. "Though you know, you would've been more useful as a linoone, but I guess that means you'll just have to work all the harder to make up for it!"

"Enough chatting, hurry back upstairs to the main gathering space, all of you," Guildmaster Elgyem said before teleporting away.

Though all four of them knew what a dire position the guild was in, not one of them could wipe the smiles from their faces as they glanced around at each other, a full team once more.

"So what are we standing around here for?" Isola said, breaking that brief moment of contented silence.

"Let's get going!" Lisa said as she dashed out of the room.

Ryan followed behind immediately, but Isola hung back for a moment and looked at Cody. "Want a ride? You haven't so much as eaten for days, and all you've been doing is exerting yourself… Even if you don't remember it."

In truth, Cody felt absolutely horrible. It felt like he hadn't eaten for weeks, not days, and he couldn't so much as take a step without wanting to groan aloud from the pain. *But for once, I'm not really in the mood to whine about it. There's more important things to do, and I'm not going to be a burden anymore.*

He gave her a smile and ran out of the room, shouting back at her, "Just see if you can catch up!"

Rather than reply, Isola just smiled bigger and jogged behind him, not bothering to point out how often he was tripping out of exhaustion, nor how slow he was going even when he was maintaining his stride.

Though they were far down in the base of the guild's central column of rock, it didn't take too long for them to reach the main gathering

spot, which was relatively low in the guild, albeit still above the water line. The massive, cavernous room was completely filled with pokémon, yet all were silent as they listened to Deputy Swadloon, Guildmaster Elgyem, Deputy Zoroark, Terrakion, and Keldeo, who were discussing the situation at the front of the room loudly enough for the whole guild to hear.

"-none of our attempts to melt or break the ice sealing off most of the entrances are working," Deputy Swadloon was saying, "So at this point, only the small flying pokémon who can make it out of the windows and any small water pokémon who can survive the fall to the ocean below can possibly make it out. I mean, pokémon could still get out using the walkways to land, but there's pretty much no hope of making it out that way, with so many pokémon guarding the exits."

"Nonsense. I suspect we'll be able to make it out those ways just fine," Guildmaster Elgyem said.

Deputy Swadloon rolled her eyes. "I don't think you really understand-"

"What of the Western Guild? How are they?" Keldeo interrupted, pawing at the stone beneath him anxiously. Though a perfectly capable leader himself, he was unable to face such a situation with nearly as much calm as Terrakion and the others.

All of a sudden, Fo and Fee - the Eastern Guild's resident abra and the Northern Guild's refugee abra - teleported onto the slight rise in the floor that served as the stage for the conversation at hand and answered Keldeo's question. "Badly," Fo said. "We might have a number of pokémon out looking for Reshiram and Vulpix, but the Western Guild had dedicated practically their entire guild to it. Deputy Zebstrika is the only sort of authority there, and one of the few strong pokémon of note - Cobalion, Virizion, and Guildmaster Emolga all left with the others in search of Vulpix. They haven't been sealed off by ice like we have, but all of their exits to the surface are

completely surrounded, and they don't have near enough pokémon to get out, or even put up much of a fight."

The guildmaster let out a bit of a sigh. "Well, that does pose a problem… And if we attempt any sort of escape, the Kyurem's forces say they'll launch their attacks on both of our guilds. Though on another note, I think the fact that none of the exits have been sealed off at the Western Guild is a good sign. They aren't so close to water as we are - no doubt there's not enough water in the air for this strange, unbreakable ice to be formed. The Western Guild will still be in trouble if we try something, but I suppose there's no helping that - I trust the Western Guild to take care of themselves. No matter what, we can't let these pokémon have their way with us."

The guildmembers looked at each other uncertainly, but a grin suddenly came across Deputy Swadloon's face as she looked at Elgyem. "You brilliant idiot - you've got a plan, don't you, Elgyem?"

"Well, not a particularly good one," Elgyem said. "But if all the psychic types could synch their powers with mine, I might be able to get a few of the strongest fighters just outside of the guild. Between you, me, Keldeo, Terrakion, and Deputy Zoroark, we might be able to distract them enough to give everyone else a chance to escape."

Deputy Swadloon's face immediately returned to its usual unamused look. "That's a terrible plan. They've got about fifty pokémon at both of the entrances. With practically two guilds here, we could fight them on even ground, but only if we could get *everyone* outside. Even a dozen of the strongest pokémon here wouldn't be able to so much as distract one of those armies for long enough for everyone else to get out before those ice types completely seal off the last two exits. Not to mention, you'd get no second chance! You wouldn't be able to use teleport soon after something like that, even on just yourself in order to escape if you were in a tight spot… Idiot. They'll kill you and anyone else who fights with you, and the rest of us will starve or die of thirst trapped in the guild."

The lights on Guildmaster Elgyem's hands flashed while he thought for a moment. "I suppose that's true. The plan doesn't have a high chance at success. But no other ideas come to mind."

"There must be something we can do," Terrakion said, unwilling to give up. "We have a lot of firepower here, after all. We've just got to somehow get enough pokémon out to keep the ice types from freezing our remaining exits while everyone else escapes. I *could* ram some new exits out of the guild's walls, but… it would take too much time. When this guild was made, it was made in order to stay standing no matter what. The pokémon outside would hear my attempts and no doubt freeze up whatever cracks I could possibly make."

"Whatever we do, we need to choose fast!" Keldeo said. "They said they won't wait long!"

Zoroark moved over to the edge of the stage and lay down on her back, her feet dangling over the stage's side. "Maybe we should just give 'em what they want, that little zigzagoon of yours," she suggested with a laugh.

Though she had clearly intended it as a joke, many of the pokémon in the room began talking amongst each other seriously, considering the option.

Cody jumped up onto Isola's back and looked around a bit worriedly, seeing that many of them liked Zoroark's suggestion - especially the Northern guildmembers, who didn't know him at all. "Guess I haven't made many friends in the guild," Cody muttered.

"Of course not," Ryan said. "We're the only ones crazy enough to put up with your constant whining and few positive points."

"What do you mean, few positive points?" he said, snacking on a sitrus berry that Isola had grabbed for him on their way up. Even with so much negativity directed at him, he couldn't help but feel cheery. After all, he was finally himself after so long being trapped in the cold

and darkness of Kyurem's grasp. "I'm handsome, *great* at battling, charming, smart, brave-"

"Quit wasting your time listing all the thing's you're *not,* " Lisa said.

Perhaps prodded by the whispered conversations taking place all around him, an idea came to Cody's mind. And stupid and reckless though it was, he couldn't help but see it as the best possibility for the entire guild to be saved. "Oh, really, Lisa? You don't think I'm any of that stuff?"

"I don't think it. I know it," she replied.

"Well, then let me prove you otherwise." With a grin plastered on his face, he climbed up on top of Isola's head and shouted above the mutterings of the room, "Hey, Guildmaster, I think Deputy Zoroark's plan is great!"

The muttering rose as everyone turned around to see Cody there, held aloft above most of the pokémon thanks to Isola's height.

"Cody, we aren't giving you up to them," Elgyem said, a slight frown on his face. "Even if both Reshiram and Zekrom have been awoken already, I find it a bad idea to give Kyurem anything he wants - it could have much more dire consequences than we could imagine."

"Not to mention, Mr. Logical here is forgetting to mention that you're a guildmember here, whether we like it or not," Deputy Swadloon chimed in. "We're not letting anything happen to you."

Cody looked down to Isola for a moment. "You've got my back, right?"

She looked concerned, but replied, "Definitely."

"Then I'll be counting on you. Mind going forward so we can talk more to the Guildmaster?"

Isola did as Cody suggested, and the conversations in the room rose ever higher as the speculations as to what Cody was really thinking circulated. Yet still, Cody managed to find a voice long enough to speak over them. "I'm not counting on getting captured permanently. Just until the rest of you all can save me." His paws were trembling now - as a human, he'd never been a great public speaker, and even now he was nervous about speaking in front of so many about such a stupid plan. But now, so much more was on the line. He wasn't going to let a little stage fright stand in his way.

The guildmaster looked closer at Cody, his eyes filled with curiosity, just as they always were. "In that case, what do you have in mind?"

"You all are looking for me, right?" Cody shouted out at the top of his voice from the place he'd been teleported to, about a hundred feet East of the army of pokémon at the guild's southern entrance.

A number of pokémon turned to look his direction, right as another voice just south of them shouted, "Or are you looking for me?"

Even those of Kyurem's army who hadn't heard the initial shout heard this one, and it soon became obvious to every one of those fifty or so pokémon what was going on.

Somehow, their primary target had escaped from the guild and was taunting them.

And, even more unbelievably, there were now two of him.

With a grin, Cody looked off towards the other zigzagoon, and knew that there would be no way for the army to focus in on which was real and which was fake. After all, Deputy Zoroark's illusion was a flawless replica of him.

Cody could now hear the confused rumblings of the army, and shouts asking for orders. He waited, standing as best he could on his two hind legs so that he'd be fully visible. The army of mostly ice

types recovered quickly from their confusion, and in what seemed like no time at all, two groups of ten pokémon each were breaking off, one for each of the two different versions of Cody.

Well, the rest is up to you, Guildmaster, he said as he turned and ran off, pushing his body faster and faster despite his exhaustion. *I guess this is one of those times fear actually helps, because hell if I'd be running at all right now otherwise. I just hope Guildmaster Elgyem and everyone else can pull this off!*

He could hear pounding feet racing behind him along the shore of Sprawling Shallows, as well as the sound of wings, getting closer and closer with each passing moment. Fear could only push him so fast, after all; it was inevitable that he'd be caught.

Come on, come on, come on! Hurry up, Elgyem!

To his relief, he heard a sudden commotion somewhere far behind him, at the guild's base. He risked a glance backwards and saw that, so far, the plan was a success: Terrakion, Keldeo, and Guildmaster Elgyem had all been teleported outside to guard the southern entrance, while dozens of pokémon began flooding down the long walkway towards freedom. Terrakion, Keldeo, and Elgyem needed only to hold the entrance until they could make it out. Against fifty, such a feat would have been impossible, even for three pokémon as strong as them. But against thirty, it just might work.

But while Cody was busy looking, he tripped and fell. He quickly pushed himself to his feet again, but before he could even start running, he was already surrounded.

Trying to be as intimidating as possible, he spiked up his fur and let it spark with a held-back thunderbolt. "I'm warning you, back off, or you'll be sorry!" he bluffed.

From just in front of him, a froslass floated towards him. He fired off his thunderbolt at her, and for a moment, she was incapacitated from the pain of enduring the attack. But in another moment, she shook

off the lingering sparks and smiled at him. "Nice try, sweetie, but not good enough. You *are* the zigzagoon we're looking for, correct?"

His heart still pounding as he thought about what might happen next, he nonetheless made a bold reply. "You might want to get back to your friends, or the whole 'sealing off the guild' thing won't do anything."

"It hardly matters, if you're the real Cody," she said, her very proximity to him sending waves of cold through his body.

"Well, tough luck there, huh?" Cody said, terribly conscious of how bad a liar he usually was and hoping that, just this once, the obviousness of it might be covered up by the genuine fear anyone would have in this situation. "I'm just a regular old zigzagoon."

She continued to smile at him, though the gaze in her eyes was cold and callous. "Hmph. I doubt that, but I suppose we'll just have to bring you to Kyurem to find out, won't we?"

Before Cody could do anything to defend himself, the froslass let out a breath of freezing air filled with snow, and Cody felt his fur and muscles go stiff as ice formed on his entire body. Just that little powder snow attack was enough to nearly knock him out in his current state, but he somehow managed to remain barely conscious as he sat there on the ground, completely immobile.

"All of you, fall back and help the others seal the guild, if it's still possible," the froslass ordered as she picked up Cody in her arms and easily lifted him off the ground. "I'll take this zigzagoon and-"

"Froslass, incoming!" one of the other pokémon, a snover, suddenly shouted, pointing back in the direction of the guild.

Everyone turned, ready for battle, but no one was quite prepared for the one-headed doduo moving so fast that by the time the rest of them saw her, she was already vaulting over their heads. Nor were they ready for the sudden barrage of attacks from the minccino on

her back who, though not very powerful, was skilled enough at various attacks to hit several different pokémon with their worst possible weakness before any of the others could react. Nor was the elegant and cruel froslass ready for the young kangaskhan that leapt off of the doduo's back and put all of her momentum into a fire punch that landed right in the middle of the froslass's face.

Show-offs, Cody thought as the froslass dropped him and he crashed to the ground, wincing at the impact of his back against the river's shore. He tried to move once again, but found that he could manage absolutely nothing - he was too weak right now, and the ice too solid.

He didn't see much of what happened next. Lying frozen on his back was perhaps not the best viewing position for seeing the battle going on around him. But from the sounds of what was happening - the loud battle cries of Lisa as she went all-out, the taunting of Ryan as he loosed attack after attack, and even the occasional victorious cry from Isola - Cody could tell that he wasn't exactly needed for this particular battle.

Something tells me that they're letting out their frustration from however long I've been controlled, he thought, the idea making him feel a bit warm and fuzzy inside despite his current situation.

"Take THAT, you freak of an ice-type! No one battles with me and wins!" Lisa yelled.

… *Well, maybe Isola and Ryan are letting out frustration on my behalf. Lisa's just the same old Lisa.*

In what seemed like no time at all, the sounds of the battle promptly ended, and Cody found himself being thrown up onto Isola's back by Lisa and Ryan.

"Hey, watch it!" he said, now unfrozen enough to move a little and speak, at the very least. "I just draw off a huge bunch of pokémon

and got frozen, and you thank me by tossing me around like dead weight?"

"Yeah, well, tough," Lisa said as she and Ryan jumped onto Isola's back as well. "Another minute and that creepy froslass would've been flying off with you to who-knows-where, so you should be thanking us!"

"So what do we do now?" Isola asked. "Should we go back and help the rest of the guild?"

"They've got it covered," Ryan said, glancing back at the battle at the base of the guild, which was indeed going in the guild's favor, even with the other half of Kyurem's army having finally made it across the river to support their besieged comrades. "Besides, we've gotta keep our helpless little zigzagoon-cicle safe, don't we?" He tickled Cody's nose with his tail, causing him to sneeze, which in turn sent little pieces of ice spraying everywhere.

Cody laughed as he saw that the sneeze had both freed up his movement more and managed to cover both Ryan and Lisa in little bits of fast-melting ice. "Okay, so what'll happen next?"

Ryan shrugged. "Well, I guess it's like what Deputy Zoroark was suggesting back in the guild, right before they teleported you out. With only one exit, the guild's no safe place to stay anymore. The Southern Guild should be heading up to help out the Western Guild right now, so we don't need to be there, so we might as well bring this battle to Abomasnow."

"I dunno…" Cody grumbled. "We don't even know if that'll accomplish anything, since we don't even know for sure if that's where all these forces of Kyurem's have been gathering. And we don't know at all if Kyurem's there, of if winning there will help us find him, erm, it - whatever Kyurem is. And it's so cold, too… I've had enough of the cold for a lifetime."

"Whine whine whine. Come on, now, Cody. You use yourself as bait for the sake of the entire guild, and *now* you're going to run away from a fight? Just because of a little cold?" Lisa asked.

Cody grinned a little, though he tried his best to hide it. *If it's to help save this world, save this guild, save Team Misfits, and get back at that jerk Kyurem…*

"No way am I backing down now," he said confidently. "But only if Team Misfits is planning on sticking with me to the end, whatever goes down."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Lisa said, a battle-ready gleam in her eye.

Ryan flicked his tail back and forth, seemingly happily. "You can count me in."

Isola briefly twisted her neck around and gently tapped Cody on the nose with her beak, if only for the briefest moment. "I'm with you to the end."

[EDIT - in response to a couple of people being confused, I edited *Chapter 25: Max* and tried to make it a lot clearer that Zoroark and the guildmembers who came with her to attack the Eastern Guild are all good, and that they were simply tricked by Guildmaster Abomasnow, who is NOT good. So… Yeah. Zoroark = good. Abomasnow = bad. Got it memorized?]

Lots of stuff to say, some random, some not:

Firstly, WHY DO MISFITS CHAPTERS ALWAYS END UP SO LONG AGSLDKJGSLKDJG. And my writing wasn't at it's best here, but whatevs, I still like it. ^_^ Have I mentioned that Cody sort of snuck up on me and became my favorite character, even though I pretty much hated him as a person at first? Yeah, he did. I still love Vulpix too, of course, but I've realize that I relate more to a somewhat

irritable guy than I do an amnesiac. Go figure. :) And I love Max too, but he's completely unlike me in almost every way possible.

Secondly, I have greater motivation than ever before to consistently get out a chapter a week up until the end of this fic! Because I realized that if I can keep it up, then I will JUST be able to finish right as November starts, which means I'll still be able to do National Novel Writing Month without putting this fic on hold right before the climax. :D

Thirdly, huge huge HUGE thanks to all of you for making this story such a success! I've just hit 200,000 words with this chapter. And even though this isn't my longest fic by any means (nor will it ever be my longest), I get a lot of hits on it (more even than The Language of Life had at its end), and I nearly have as many reviews as The Language of Life - no doubt this chapter will be the one to put it over TLOL's review count. Plus. I'm just generally hearing lots of good things from you guys, because all of you are absolutely wonderful. I really appreciate all the support, everyone! I hope you continue to enjoy this fic up through the end, and I promise I'll do my best not to disappoint!

… Anyway, that's all I've got to say. We've got Team Courage and their adventures up North coming up next chapter, so stay tuned! ^_^

Chapter 29: Team Courage

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Team Courage

"I really don't know what happened," Max said as he and the rest of Team Courage trekked along, making their way through Deadtree Woods. "I mean, dragonbreath relies on you feeling strong and brave. Or, at least, that's what I thought. But I wasn't being particularly brave. I mean, Cody couldn't even touch me. So why was my dragonbreath the strongest I've seen it in a while?"

"Surely you've got some idea," Zeke said at the head of the group, his long, powerful legs easily clearing a path in the snow for the other, smaller pokémon to follow.

Max looked up at the leafless trees that rose up all around the group, lost in thought for just a moment. "Well…" he said after a while. "I was still just feeling good about trying to do something, rather than sitting stuck at the guild. Even if I didn't end up helping Cody in the end, even if we honestly have no idea where to look for Vulpix even now, I still feel good about just *doing*… stuff. Like… Confidence, I suppose? Confidence in myself, and what we're doing? Maybe that's what's more important to dragon attacks than feeling brave or powerful."

"How about when you did a real dragonbreath for the first time, when Landorus almost caught you and the other humans?" Kuro asked as she slowed her pace to walk alongside Max. "What were you feeling then?"

"I definitely wouldn't call that confidence," Max said without hesitation. "I was scared silly, didn't think I had a chance. But maybe it was determination? For once, I just told myself that I had to be strong enough to turn around and fight. So maybe what I need for dragonbreath and dragonclaw is some mix of those things - the

confidence that comes from choosing to do something and sticking to it. Does that seem right?"

"How should we know?" Kara asked from her perch on Zeke's back; she'd insisted early on in the journey that she didn't handle the cold well, and so was avoiding walking through the snow. "You're the only one who knows any dragon-type attacks. We can't help you."

Wagging his tail happily, Aiden said, "But that sounds like how I'd imagine it! I bet you've got it!"

Max sighed. "That's what I'm worried about. Because if that *is* right, then it's only a matter of time before I go back to my usual self and panic in the middle of some battle, and then neither of those attacks will be of use."

"But that's what we're out here enduring the cold for, right?" Kuro commented, though being a fire-type, she herself was hardly even bothered by the chill. "So you can be doing something, so you can get your confidence. So don't worry about it! In no time at all, I bet you'll have those dragon-type attacks down permanently."

"Yeah, I guess that's so," Max said, a little bit of a hopeful smile on his face. "Who knows? Maybe something really *will* come of all this, and this plan ends up *not* getting us all killed or captured."

"Don't get your hopes too high," Kara grumbled, withdrawing a bit further into the fluffy mane of fur on Zeke's neck.

Zeke chuckled. "If you're going to be so pessimistic, then maybe I should just go out of my way to meet your bad expectations. How 'bout you try walking yourself for a while? Bet that'll give you more to complain about. Sheesh, look at Max! Type weakness to ice and he's still putting up with walking through the cold without any trouble."

"I wouldn't say I'm not having any trouble," Max said as he took a moment to shake some stray snow from his body. "Feathers are

great, but I don't exactly have any to keep my legs warm, do I?"

"You're always welcome to catch a ride on me, if you can put up with the cranky galvantula," Zeke said.

"Or you could try flying, so at least you're not getting your feet wet," Aiden suggested as he shook some of the dampness from his own paws.

Max laughed; Aiden meant well enough, but he rarely thought about what he was saying. "You do realize I can't fly, right?"

Aiden's enthusiasm left him momentarily as he physically drooped, his tail dragging in the snow behind him. "Oh. Right."

"It's not a bad idea, though," Kuro said. "Not *flying* flying, of course, but you could practice what little you can do on these trees, right? Even if the trees are dead, the branches still look solid enough, and there are no leaves to get in your way. Why not try it?"

"Actually… Yeah, that should work," Max said, excited for any chance to do even his limited sort of flying. With a flap and a hop he managed to get onto Zeke's back, and another flap later he was on one of the lower branches. Zeke and the others paused for a minute as they watched him begin to flap and hop from branch to branch.

It's a bit more tiring than just walking along, but that's okay. It'll make me stronger, and it'll make me stronger on my own terms.

"Well, come on, guys!" he said as he started to get ahead of the others. "What're you staring at?"

The others wasted no time catching back up to him. Before long, Zeke said, "You know, Kara, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Then hurry up and ask it, don't just tell me you're gonna," Kara said, acting as grumpy as ever.

"That first time me and Max met you, we were fighting against all those pokémon who were occupying your valley. And you said they came from farther North and their forest had been destroyed by the cold, right? And since this place is just north of Sheltered Vale, do you think this is their old home?"

Kara let out a dismissive snort and said, "How should I know for sure where those jerks came from? They're out of my valley now, and that's all I care about." She paused for a bit, then added more quietly, "Though if this is where they're from, I can't blame 'em for moving out. There's no way to live here anymore. None of these sorts of trees could handle this sort of cold. Not even the most sturdy aspear tree. Glad we brought our own food along." She moved over to Zeke's shoulder and poked into the large bag that hung at his side, but Zeke glared back at her before she could grab anything from it.

"I hate that the North's turned into this place!" Aiden suddenly bursted out. "I mean, I like the snow as much as anyone, but it used to only be a little bit up where the guild is and north of there! There was still plenty of other places for pokémon that weren't ice types. Why'd Kyurem have to change it all?"

Kuro's ears drooped down sympathetically. "I'm more worried about the guildmaster. He used to always, *always* put us guildmembers first. He's gruff, but… he was always there for us. And if someone messed with one guildmember, they messed with *him.* So why would he do this? He's not a zombie like the weather gods were, or like Cody and Emma… So that means he's working under Kyurem willingly, right? But why? Why would he do something like that?"

Zeke shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe once all this is over, you or Zoroark or someone will be able to talk to him. Make him see sense. And then maybe he'll tell us why he's doing all this. But before that, we need to do what we set out to do, and that's find Vulpix. Anyone have any ideas?"

"Me and Kuro could track her, but to do that we have to find her scent somewhere and follow it," Aiden said. "And with how often it snows here, the smell might be covered up even if we did stumble across her path by chance."

"Well, keep your noses on high alert, anyway," Zeke said. "Any other ideas? How about from you, team leader?"

Max didn't immediately respond, so Zeke looked up at him and repeated, "Max, you still with us?"

"Huh?" he said as he finally looked down from way up high in the tree he was in; he'd been going progressively higher for a couple minutes now while the others had continued their conversation, so he'd barely heard Zeke the first time. Not to mention, his attention was being dominated by the two pinpoints in the distance that had first prompted him to climb so high. "Uh, yeah, I'm with you. It's just… I think I've found them. Vulpix and Bulbasaur."

Everyone stopped and looked up at Max, and he continued, "Hard to say for sure, since they're a ways off, but the color seems just about right for it to be the two of them."

"Let me see!" Kara said as she jumped off of Zeke's back and scurried up the nearest tree trunk. Once she was as high up as she could get, she shouted back down, "They really are far off, but I think today's our lucky day, guys! It really does look like it's them!"

Zeke grinned. "Well, team leader? What do you say we do now?"

"Are you still really insisting that I'm team leader, Zeke?" Max asked. "You or Kuro would be better-"

"But that's not the point, is it?" Kuro interrupted. "We came here following you to help you out, so you're team leader, and you choose what we do from here."

Max sighed and, following Kara's lead, came down the tree and jumped onto Zeke's back. "Well, we keep together until we're closer, then split up at my signal and surround them. But if she's with Bulbasaur… Well, maybe she's not under Kyurem's control anymore? I don't remember hearing anything about Bulbasaur being in with her on the stealing of the Light Stone, at least. I guess my point is, don't attack unless they attack first or they try to escape, okay? Both of them were nice enough pokémon at the Solstice Games. I want to believe they're still like that."

"Got it, Max!" Aiden barked happily, no doubt glad that they wouldn't be attacking first and asking questions later.

"Sure, sure, whatever," Kara said. "Let's just get going before we lose them."

Without another word, they started off at a brisk trot, moving as quietly as possible so that they wouldn't announce their presence to their targets.

And as Max rode along on Zeke's back, thoughts soon began to whirl through his head.

What do I really hope to accomplish by confronting Vulpix? With the objective of his journey so near at hand, Max suddenly realized that he was less than certain about why he was doing this. *I want to do something, to force myself to be braver. Will I feel like catching Vulpix will do that? If she's really back to normal, then won't I just be fighting a friend? And if we win, then what? We take her back to the nearest guild, and she gets permanently locked up? I… Even considering what she did, I just can't feel like she deserves that. But what else can we do? Even if she's done nothing wrong, having her out here without protection risks everything, especially if she is Reshiram's hero, like everyone's been saying.*

Zeke suddenly slowed down, and Max jerked himself out of his thoughts to see that his plan perhaps wasn't going to be a big success. With the trees so bare and the landscape relatively flat,

there was no way for the group to get closer than they were now without being seen. The only good part of the situation was that now that they were closer, they could see that the pokémon really were the ones they were looking for- Vulpix and Bulbasaur were certainly there, moving along at a fairly brisk pace and completely unaware that they were being watched.

Max sighed, then whispered, "Guess there's nothing else for it. We make a run for it and get around them before they can escape, if they try. Zeke, you should be easily faster than them, and you'll be able to get me and Kara in front of them. And Team FireFang should be able to match their speed, at the very least. We should be able to do it. Let's go."

Zeke smiled. "All right, then, hold on tight."

Max tightened his grip on the luxray's fur just in time, because in another moment Zeke was flying across the ground as fast as he could, electricity surging through his muscles and further speeding him up.

Vulpix and Bulbasaur soon caught sight of them and started running the opposite direction, but it hardly mattered. Zeke was so much larger and faster that he still easily managed to pass them and cut them off. They tried veering off another direction, but Zeke adjusted well enough, thwarting their escape once again.

Max saw Vulpix and Bulbasaur exchange a look and a breathless word or two, and then the two pokémon came to a halt, both standing tense but still even as Kuro and Aiden caught up and all five members of Team Courage spread out to surround them.

Before Max could actually begin talking to them, however, it became clear that Vulpix and Bulbasaur were both engrossed in a conversation with each other, though both kept their eyes constantly turned to Max and his team.

Max couldn't catch most of it, but guessed what it was about as soon as Bulbasaur finally turned his attention fully to Max and asked, "Are you guys willing to hear us out, or are you going to attack us just like everyone else?"

Max came a bit closer so that they could speak at a more moderate tone and said, "We want to hear you out. I mean, it's true you took the Light Stone, Vulpix, and anyone who sees you is supposed to capture you on sight. Guildmaster's orders. But… You know, I want to believe you're not working for Kyurem or anything like that."

Bulbasaur turned to Vulpix. "See? So let's just tell them! Maybe they can even help!"

"I honestly don't think they can help, even if they want to…" Vulpix said. Then, with a sigh, she added, "But we might as well give it a shot."

"You want me to tell it, or…?"

"I can tell it," Vulpix said as she drew herself up a bit and, with a smile at Max, said, "I like to at least think I can talk to a friend without being too shy. We are still friends, right Max?"

She seems… Different. Physically, she looks way more beat up than back then, when she looked nice enough. But even more than that, she seems more confident. Like she's more present than she ever was before. It's only been a couple weeks since the Solstice Games, but I guess all of us humans have changed a lot since then.

Max smiled back at her. "Can't say you said more than a word or two to me back at the Solstice Games, but we're still friends as far as I'm concerned."

"Us too!" Aiden barked, wagging his tail and looking over to Kuro. "We're still friends with her, right?"

"You bet," Kuro said. "Of course, that doesn't mean we won't do what's best for you and haul your pretty little tails back to the guilds if we don't think your story's up to snuff."

Vulpix nodded. "Fair enough. Mind if we just talk as friends then? With Bulbasaur and me *not* surrounded?"

Max looked to Zeke doubtfully, uncertain whether that would be a good choice or not. *Vulpix seems back to normal, but what if she attacks us? Or tries to escape when we're not ready for it?*

"It's not like we'd be able to outrun a luxray, anway," Bulbasaur commented. "And as for five-on-two… Well, what happens in that battle probably won't change, whether we start out surrounded or not."

"He's got a point," Kara said. "Not like I trust 'em or anything, but they don't look like they'd be able to put up much of a fight against the five of us."

"I don't know about that," Max said. "I remember the both of them were great battlers at the Solstice games. But what the heck, why not? Let's just talk and see if we can't sort things out."

Vulpix and Bulbasaur both relaxed a bit as everyone gathered together, Team Rebirth facing Team Courage on much more personal terms.

"So, want to start with how you got those burns?" Kuro suggested. "They look bad… You need medical attention, Vulpix, so that they heal right. And I say this as a friend, *not* just as someone trying to get you back to the guilds."

"I don't have time for that right now… But thanks for your concern," she said, momentarily looking down at her body. The burns did indeed look bad - her entire coat of fur was singed a shade darker than usual, and the places where it had burned away entirely revealed angry red patches of skin. All of the burns seemed ready to

burst into an open wound at any moment. "It wasn't from a battle or anything. I had to do it, because… Well, let me start at the beginning.

"I don't know what the other members of the Western Guild are saying now, but I didn't take the Light Stone on purpose. The ice necklace took over. Kyurem took control and made me take it, and had me run until I was so physically exhausted that I blacked out and he lost control of me."

Not only is she talking more than I ever heard her during the Solstice Games, but she's louder now, too. She always seemed so unsure before, so quiet. Maybe she's been through a lot to get to this point, but I'm glad she's finally sure of herself. Just hope I can be like that sometime soon.

Vulpix continued, "When I woke up, the ice collar I had was heavier than ever, and I had manacles of ice, too. They wouldn't let me turn around and bring the Light Stone back. But… I was afraid of waiting for the guildmembers who were following me. I'm almost certain that Cobalion, Virizion, and some other pokémon wanted to kill me. They probably still want me dead. So I went farther north, and Bulbasaur eventually found me."

"And then she did the stupidest thing I've ever seen in my life. That's when she got all her burns," Bulbasaur said, though he did so with a slight smile. "But it worked. She got all the ice on her back to just being the ice pendant that she's always had."

"And by doing so, I somehow also woke up Reshiram," Vulpix said. "Maybe because I was really trying to stand up to Kyurem for the first time. I'm not sure exactly, but the end result is the same. But… Well, he didn't stick around. He seemed like he was angry about what happened to Zekrom, and flew off before I could even talk to him. But I've got to go after him. We're following him, and he's just been destroying everything in front of him here up north. And I'm not sure if he'll listen to anyone other than me, since I woke him up in the first

place. That's why me and Bulbasaur can't go back to the Guild yet… And that's even if they'd welcome us back without killing us."

"Ever since we woke up Reshiram, we've been on the run from guild and enemy alike," Bulbasaur added. "A blizzard set them all off track for a while, and we've been covering our footsteps as best we can, and we've even managed to completely lose Kyurem's followers a couple of times right when we seemed doomed. But they're catching up again. So we've really got to get moving. So what do you say? Are you going to let us go on? Or will you join us?" Bulbasaur asked hopefully.

Max was about to answer, but Kuro spoke up before he could get a word in. "That's the stupidest plan ever," she said angrily. "If you don't get caught by Kyurem's army, then Reshiram's going to kill you if he's that angry. There's absolutely no reason you should stay on the run. I know you think pokémon want to kill you, but I know the pokémon at the Southern Guild now, if only just a bit. None of them seem that bloodthirsty."

"Neither of our guildmasters would allow it, that's for certain," Zeke confirmed. "Especially since you're clearly not being controlled now, even if you were before. And Elgyem, Terrakion, and Keldeo seem to be pretty reasonable, too. Your own guild is probably reacting more strongly because they feel the most betrayed - no offense."

Vulpix sighed. "I suppose that's true. But… I still can't go. Maybe I'm imagining things, maybe not, but I feel like I've got an obligation to Reshiram. I've got to make him see sense."

"I think-" Max began.

"You know, I'm not even sure if I believe you two," Kara interrupted. "You say Reshiram just flew off because he was paranoid about what happened to Zekrom? Come on, this is *the* Reshiram we're talking about. I think he'd be able to tell if you were the same as Emma or not. So if he flew away in a rage, then *I* think it's because

he could tell, and what he saw was that you are like Emma, working for Kyurem."

"What do you think, Max?" Zeke asked. "You are the team's leader, after all."

"Well, that's what I've been trying to say, if pokémon didn't keep interrupting me!" Max said. Then, calming himself and turning to Vulpix, he said, "I believe you. Really, I do. But… If I'm wrong and Kyurem still has a strong hold on you, then you go and find Reshiram and then Kyurem wins, because he'll have control of Zekrom through Emma and Reshiram through you. And we can't risk that. Not to mention, Kuro is right. You'll get yourself killed or captured if you keep on trying to find Reshiram."

Vulpix got to her feet, as did Bulbasaur, both of them readying themselves for the battle that seemed almost sure to follow. "We can't convince you otherwise?" Vulpix asked.

Max got to his feet as well. "I went looking for you so that I could feel braver, and so that I could finally be doing something to make myself stronger, to get Kyurem's voice out of my head. If I backed down now and let you go on to get yourself destroyed, I don't think I'd be accomplishing anything."

"Wait, Kyurem's been talking to you?" Vulpix asked, alarm coming to her face.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Max said. *I didn't really mean to tell her that, but I suppose it's just as well.* "Or, at least, I think it was him. It was just a couple times, in dreams… A voice offering me power. And some really fuzzy memories of being a human, or at least they felt like memories… They didn't really seem like they could be real, though."

"You didn't make a deal with Kyurem, did you?" Vulpix asked. "In those memories, when you were human. You didn't accept anything he offered, right?"

Max looked at her questioningly, wondering where this was coming from all of a sudden. "No, not that I can remember. I just remember this really weird pokémon talking to me, except… Well, it seemed like more of just a creature than a true pokémon. Like a beast or an animal of myths. I think the animal thing was trying to convince me to do something, but I don't think I ever did it. But wait, why ask me that question? Did you… did you make a deal with Kyurem when you were a human?" *But she doesn't have any memories of being a human, does she? Or has even that changed since the last time I saw her? Or was that always a lie?*

Vulpix looked down at the ground, and something of her old, quieter self seemed to return. "I, um… yes. I made a deal with Kyurem." But then, lifting her head, she continued more confidently, "But I regret that now, and as far as I'm concerned, our deal is off. That's part of why I need to find Reshiram. To help make amends. And if you don't let me do it… I'll fight you, and I'll get away."

She widened her stance as she looked at each of her soon-to-be opponents one by one, prepared to fight whoever made the first move. Bulbasaur stood at her side as well, equally ready for battle.

Max's team got to their feet behind him as Max said, "Then that's how it's got to be. Are you rea-"

"Wait just a moment!" Kuro said as her hackles rose ever higher. "I smell something strange. Like…"

Aiden seemed to almost double in size as his fur stood on end as well. "Someone else is here! Over there, upwind!"

They all turned northwards and scanned the dead forest for a few moments, looking to see who Team FireFang possibly could have scented. For a few moments, they saw no one.

Then, out of nowhere, a voice said, "Well, guess I've been found out." And then, in a shout, it said, "All right, troops! Time to get what we came here for!"

In the distance, they finally saw motion: more than a dozen pokémon were standing up from where they'd been hiding behind a rise in the land. But while Team Courage was looking at these new arrivals to the scene as they came steadily closer, both Vulpix and Bulbasaur kept their eyes trained on precisely the point where they'd heard the very familiar voice come from, at a tree trunk not twenty feet away.

"Streya, it's you, isn't it?" Vulpix said, her almost murderously quiet. "Didn't you learn yesterday that no matter how many pokémon you bring, you're not going to catch me and Bulbasaur?"

From behind the tree trunk, a sneasel suddenly stepped out, a cruel smile on her face. "What do you know, it's my old friend Vulpix! Why don't you come with me, huh? Relive those good times we had together? Let the cold regain its grip on you?"

"Not a chance," Vulpix said.

Streya just snickered and said, "You know, the Lord of Ice only really needs the human who can control Reshiram. He'd like *any* humans, of course," she said, her eyes drifting threateningly to Max, "but if you just give up now and come with me, Vulpix, I promise I'll leave the rest of your friends alone. But the deal's off as soon as the rest of my troops get here, so best decide fast."

In response, Vulpix fired off an attack at the sneasel, something that Max had never seen before. It wasn't unlike a flamethrower, except it wasn't flames she was breathing. Rather, it seemed like a blast of pure, burning energy so hot that a broad gust of hot air traveled in its wake, instantly vaporizing more than a paw's height of snow for many feet around the central attack.

Streya managed to jump upwards at just the last moment, though the impact of the blast on the ground where she had been sent her flying farther than she expected; still, she managed to grab hold of a branch and swing herself on top of it.

Though Max had been watching the amazing attack, his attention now turned to Vulpix herself as he saw her stumble in place a moment, as if about to fall to the ground. She looked suddenly disheveled and exhausted, as if she was the one who had been attacked.

"Vulpix, I told you not to try that again!" Bulbasaur said as he looked at her, concerned. "You're not ready to use it yet. It still takes too much out of you!"

"That was overheat, wasn't it?" Streya called out tauntingly. "I'm impressed. Looks like the little lost human has picked up some new tricks since I saw her last! Well, tough luck, because it looks like you spent too much energy in one attack. How much help will you be when the rest of my friends get here, I wonder? You've got about a minute left - you can still save your friends and come with me quietly."

Vulpix glared at the sneasel. "I think I gave you my answer already. Should I send it again and see if you get it this time?"

"By all means, go ahead," Streya said. "You'll be absolutely useless in battle if you try overheat again, after all. Makes things all the easier for us!" She opened her arms wide right as twenty pokémon fell in line beneath her, halting momentarily as they waited for her command to attack.

Vulpix simply glared at her.

"So? What's your answer? I'll even leave it up to the rest of you guys, since I'm just nice like that," Streya said. "Hand over Vulpix, and the rest of you go free. You've got a minute to talk it over."

Everyone turned to look at each other, and Vulpix promptly said, "I'd love to save you guys, but I'm not handing myself over to them, and I'm not letting you hand me over to them, either."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Max said. His heart was pounding, and he felt terrified, but for once… Well, he'd even been given the obvious option of handing Vulpix over, and yet he hadn't considered it even for a second. The odds weren't good, but…

This is what I'm here for, he thought. *I've said this probably a thousand times, but this time for real: I'm not backing down. I'm not going to be a coward. I've got a plan… It might lessen our chances of victory, but I think it's gotta be done.*

"Vulpix, Bulbasaur, you two should run," Max suggested. "You can't get caught, Vulpix, no matter what. Not if you're Reshiram's hero. We'll hold the rest of them off while you two escape. Everyone okay with that?"

Zeke grinned broadly, exchanging a glance with the similarly ecstatic Team FireFang. "I knew you had it in you, buddy! That's a brave plan if ever I've heard one."

"But we can't just leave you guys!" Vulpix protested.

"Yeah, she's right!" Kara said, annoyed. "It'll be twenty-on-five! We'll be slaughtered!"

"We've got two fire types versus all their ice types, and two evolved pokémon on top of that, which is something," Max said. "I think we'll manage. Come on, Vulpix, you've gotta-"

"Time's up!" Streya said. "What's it going to be?"

Vulpix looked at Max for a moment longer, and then nodded. "I don't like it, but all right. Come on, Bulbasaur!"

Team Rebirth turned around and ran as fast as they could.

Streya just smiled. "Should've figured you were a coward at heart, Vulpix. Troops, don't let the vulpix escape!"

"Yeah, well we're not letting you go after them!" Zeke said as he fired off a powerful thunderbolt towards the nearest pokémon as he and the rest of Team Courage spread out.

"Well, I suppose we've *got* to cover them now," Kara grumbled as she crawled up a tree and started firing off electroweb attacks, not at their opponents but rather backwards, in the direction that Team Rebirth was fleeing. The sticky, electrified webs caught on the dead trunks and branches; before Streya or anyone else could possibly do anything to stop her, the way to follow Vulpix and Bulbasaur was effectively blocked off for a ways in both directions. The army could still follow, of course, but it would be just one more delay when Vulpix and Bulbasaur already had a good head start.

Only now did the sneasel get mad. "If you five want to fight so bad, then fine. We'll defeat you, then go after that Vul-" Streya broke off with a scream as the blast of an ancientpower attack slammed into her from below; she'd been too focused on Kara and the retreating vulpix to notice Max preparing to attack her.

Max grinned. He was terrified, yes, but he was fighting nonetheless. "All right, Team Courage, let's go!"

Max quickly lost track of where the rest of his teammates were. They were a team in name only right now; they had yet to practice group strategies or anything of the sort that a real team would've been working on from day one.

Yet even individually, the members of Team Courage were no pushovers. Zeke was a luxray, and by that fact alone probably the single most powerful pokémon in the battle; Kara, though lacking in raw attack power, made up for it by her skill with webs, which could at once damage the opponent and hinder further movement. Aiden and Kuro were by far the ones who shone the most. They worked like an actual team, and their flamethrower and fire fang attacks were devastating to all of the ice-types, who made up more than half of the enemie's fighters.

And though Max suffered at the hands of the many ice type attacks, he was powerful in his own right and, more importantly, much quicker and more agile than many of the stiff ice types on the field.

I can't believe I'm actually doing this! he thought to himself as he fired off a dragonbreath attack at a nearby spheal, sending the spherical pokémon literally rolling backwards and into one of its other allies. *And my dragonbreath attack - it's just as strong as it was when I was facing Landorus in the Solstice Games! I don't know if we can win, but… I'm prepared for the consequences, even if we lose! For once, I'm afraid, but I'm not giving into it! I'll buy Vulpix as much time as I can manage!*

He lashed out with a claw at an enemy snorunt, trying to put some of his dragon energy into it - he mostly failed at it, but he still managed to get off what could've worked as a passable slash attack. He got hit by a gust of icy air, but quickly regained his balance and countered with another ancientpower attack. The rock type move would no doubt be his best bet against most of the pokémon in this fight, that much he knew.

The attack hit, but Max was almost immediately hit by two more attacks from new enemies, sending him tumbling to the ground. Before he could get up again, he felt one pokémon on top of him, punching at his head and beak, and out of the corner of his eye he saw at least one more coming nearer to help.

Not good, not good!

There was his instinct to flee again; he suddenly felt like he had to get away, not just from his specific situation, but from the entire battle. He let the instinctual feeling, the fear fill him, and he used it to power up another ancientpower attack, the energy of it radiating in all directions from his body. Not as efficient as his usual, focused attack, but it did the trick; the tyrogue on his back was knocked off, and he got to his feet.

For the briefest of moments, he felt the fear continue to flood him. He was already heavily damaged, and there still seemed to be at least two healthy enemies fighting for every one, rather more damaged member of Team Courage. Their prospects were not looking good.

No. I won't run.

He mastered the instinct and, rather than run, instead whirled on his attacker, pummeling him with a series of wing attacks even as he heard another pokémon coming up behind him, even as he felt another powder snow attack hit him in the back. He managed to finish off the tyrogue just in time to dodge an ice punch from the other attacker, a jynx.

Another ancientpower attack, but this was barely strong enough to even make the jynx stumble. He was flagging, and in a couple more attacks, he'd be knocked out completely.

But I'll keep on fighting, he thought resolutely, even when he found himself too slow to dodge the worst of the ice punch attack, which sent him flying backwards into the hard-packed snow behind him. *The only thing I can do now is not let down my team by giving up, and give Vulpix a decent chance at escaping.*

The jynx was running towards him, her hand cloaked in ice; near her, a delibird was preparing to throw one of the glowing spheres it produced from its tail pouch. If either of those attacks hit, Max didn't think he'd be able to stay conscious.

"Max!" Kuro and Aiden shouted out simultaneously from somewhere behind him as he heard the rush of the pawsteps. They had seen his predicament and were coming to help.

But will they get here in time? he wondered. Then, a grin came to his beak. *It doesn't matter. I'll fight until the very end, just like them!*

He let loose a dragonbreath right in the jynx's face as, right at that moment, Kuro and Aiden leapt past him and towards his two

attackers.

Except they weren't the Kuro and Aiden Max knew. They were rapidly changing, growing as heat radiated out from their bodies. Kuro grew taller and leaner, her muzzle becoming more pointed, and vicious-looking horns sprouted from her head until she was a genuine hellhound, her jaws dripping with fire as she bit down on the panicking delibird. And Aiden grew as well, but to a much greater extent - nearly two feet taller than the new Kuro, and much more heavy-set than her, though much of his extra bulk seemed due to the massive amount of fur that covered his body. The cute puppyish growlithe was completely gone, replaced by a regal arcanine able to dispatch the distracted jynx with one flamethrower.

There was the briefest of moments where no one attack neither Team FireFang nor the archen they protected as the growls of the newly evolved pokémon rumbled through the air, deeper and more threatening than ever.

"You okay, Max?" Kuro said with a smile.

He grinned. "Not as good as you two, I'd bet, but I'll manage. Now let's hurry up and get them!"

From that point on, the three of them worked as a team, with Max firing off dragonbreaths and ancientpowers from Aiden's back, too weak to fight well on his own two feet. And for a while, the three of them seemed unstoppable, a whirlwind of Team FireFang's flames and Max's energies of a less definable kind, energies that stemmed from ancient instincts and newfound confidence.

But the tides soon changed. Evolution didn't change the fact that Kuro and Aiden had taken plenty of damage during the first half of the battle. Their exhaustion finally began to show when all the forces finally converged on the three of them, Zeke and Kara having already been knocked out. With fewer of Team Courage's members fighting, the battle once again boiled down to roughly three enemies for every one member of Team Courage still up and fighting. And

Max could barely count anymore, since his attacks were so weak and he seemed ready to fall over at the slightest icy wind attack.

If only Zeke were a bit smaller, then Aiden could pick him up and we could escape! Now would be the time to run away, and for once I wouldn't feel ashamed about it. We've done what we set out to do. But… Guess there's no helping it. We fight to the end, and hopefully Vulpix and Bulbasaur have gotten far enough aw-

"Streya, over here!" Vulpix shouted as loud as she could from so far away that she could barely be seen. The battle paused momentarily as everyone turned to look at her where she stood, atop the rise in the distance where Streya's troops had originally been hiding. She would've barely been audible from any other direction, but she had managed to circle all the way around to the north of the battle, so her strong voice carried on the southerly winds. She continued, "Streya, if you and your already battered army wants any sort of chance at catching me before I disappear, then follow me now!"

Vulpix, no! There's still a dozen of them! You and Bulbasaur have no chance! Max thought, panicked energy suddenly surging through him. *The whole reason we split up was so that you could get away, and you're ruining that now!*

Streya glared and, quickly coming to a decision, shouted to the rest of her troops, "Cryogonal! Beartic! You hold these mutts off, and everyone else, with me! After Vulpix!"

"We won't let you get her!" Aiden said as he ran forward, only to be knocked to the ground by a shadow ball to the neck from the cryogonal. Max, who had still been riding on Aiden's back, was flung off into the snow as well.

Max allowed himself a moment of despair as he lay there on the ground, not even bothering to get up. *We failed. Kyurem will get Vulpix, and the entire world will practically be destroyed.*

But he was tired of feeling sorry for himself, and tired of laying around and leaving other pokémon to fight his battle. He let go of his despair, got up, shook the snow from his feathers, and suddenly found himself grinning as he, Aiden, and Kuro faced down their two remaining oppoenents.

Vulpix never intended to leave us behind, did she? She and Bulbasaur were planning on splitting the army's attention from the beginning, probably after she had time to recover from that overheat attack. She said earlier that they'd escaped Streya before… No doubt the two of them have a plan. She's managed to make this a battle that Team Courage can win, but only by drawing the attention of a dozen other pokémon to herself. She's crazy. Absolutely crazy. But…

… That. That is the kind of courage I'm aiming for.

He literally laughed aloud. "Kuro, Aiden, you ready to take these guys down?"

The both smiled as they crouched down, fur bristling in anticipation. "Even with just three of us left, it'll be a piece of cake for Team Courage," Kuro said. "Right, Aiden?"

"Quit talking and let's finish this so we can help Vulpix!" Aiden said as he leapt forward, fire in his jaws.

Kuro and Max exchanged one last look before running forward themselves.

Thanks to Vulpix, this isn't just a battle we can win… It's a battle we will *win. And we'll do it fast, too, and catch up with her and Bulbasaur. After all, I can't just let those two idiots face Reshiram on their own!*

[EDIT: What? Rock isn't weak to ice? LAME. Anyway, nothing big, just changed a couple of lines in the story that I flubbed up due to my

misconception. If I missed any, then let me know, please!]

Anyway, not much to say here, except that I did some editing on Chapter 25: Max to help clarify that Zoroark and the pokémon with her are good, normal guild pokémon, while Abomasnow (a.k.a. the one who ordered the attack on the Eastern Guild) is pretty definitely bad. Sorry for any confusion! I sort of glossed over the summarization/explanation of the aftermath of that battle, so my bad. There was a bit of confusion about that last chapter.

Thanks for reading! Team Rebirth is next!

Chapter 30: Team Rebirth

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"Vulpix, it's the middle of the night. We need to rest," Bulbasaur said. "The surprise sleep powder got them, just like last time."

"But you know as well as I do that you had to make it more diffuse in order to get all of them this time," Vulpix replied. "Assuming the cold doesn't wake them and no one disturbs them, we've gained maybe an hour, tops. We can only do so much to cover our trail in this snow, so no doubt they're still following us. And that Streya isn't going to stop. And in this darkness, she could practically be right behind us and we wouldn't know it."

"If only these clouds would make it snow, and not just make it dark. Then our trail would at least be covered," Bulbasaur said wistfully. "Though I suppose these trees are so thick that we wouldn't be able to see even if the clouds were gone." Then, shaking his head as if to rid himself of that train of thought, he said, "But that doesn't matter! My point is, if we don't rest, we won't be able to fight them if they do catch up." His thoughts seemed disjointed, and his frustration with Vulpix was clearly audible in his voice; lack of sleep wasn't improving either teammate's mood.

Vulpix's crumpled tails swayed restlessly behind her. "We won't be able to fight them all off, even if we are rested, Bulbasaur. That's why we've got to keep moving. Besides, you can see it up ahead in the distance, right? The flashes? That's no lightning. It's gotta be Reshiram. We have to get to him before he gets away again."

"We can't make that distance in a single night, anyway!" Bulbasaur protested. "He'll probably be gone by the time we get there. We should rest now, then start off at a better pace first thing tomorrow morning."

"If we're not found by Streya before then, that is. Or… if we're not found right now." Vulpix suddenly turned around, her keen ears picking up on the sound of footsteps somewhere behind them.

Bulbasaur turned around, too, extending his vines in preparation. "Is it Streya?"

"I'm not sure. It doesn't sound like her and her troops. Too few," Vulpix said. "But… we'd best hide, just in case. We can at least have the element of surprise."

"Right," Bulbasaur said. Then the two wordlessly split up and went back the way they came, looping back around to either side of the path they had taken. Once the two were far enough back, they hid themselves in the tree roots at the sides of their footprint trail. They'd tried this strategy several times before, where they would attack while Streya and her forces still thought the two of them were farther up. And though Streya knew to expect it now, she and her troops could still do nothing but follow the pawprints and be vigilant for an attack they knew could come at any time.

But soon, both Vulpix and Bulbasaur knew that their caution was unwarranted. They could hear the sound of only three pokémon, and the three were quite larger than any three Vulpix had seen in Streya's army before. Four large, quadrupedal pokémon, by the sound of it: it had to be that Luxray, and Growlithe and Houndour, whom Vulpix had seen had evolved when she'd drawn Streya's attention.

She waited only a little longer, until she could make out Team Courage's silhouettes in the darkness as they crashed through the frosty undergrowth of the forest. But once she could see them and knew for sure, she stepped out and called, "Max! Are you all okay?"

"Vulpix!" she heard Max call back to her as the arcanine, houndoom, and luxray all closed the distance. Once they stopped, Max jumped off of Arcanine and said to them, "Vulpix and Bulbasaur, I can't

believe you actually managed to give them the slip! How'd you do it?"

Even in the darkness, Bulbasaur's grin was visible as he said, "Used my vines to climb up in a tree, hid in the snow on a thick branch, then sprayed them with sleep powder as Vulpix distracted them below."

"I've been drowsy all day because of it, but it worked," Vulpix said, surprisingly cheerful now that she knew that Max and his team were okay. "But what about you guys? You took some heavy damage, didn't you? How'd you even manage to catch up to us, nonetheless find us without running into Streya?"

Now it was Max's turn to grin. "Let's just say a little help arrived. Long story short - a lot's happened at the guild even since we left just a couple days ago, and now the Eastern Guild and all of the good Northern Guild pokémon that are with them are going to try to reclaim the Northern Guild from Abomasnow. They found us, gave us some emergency treatment, and then we *all* - Guild pokémon included - went after Streya's gang. They were already awake and after you by then, but we changed that. The guild pokémon all went after Streya, but Guildmaster Elgyem insisted we five find you and let you know what was happening."

"You mean… He didn't tell you to capture us?" Vulpix asked.

"Technically, he did," the luxray spoke up. "He figured Aiden and Kuro's noses would be faster at tracking you, especially if it got dark before we found you. We told him we would catch you…"

"… but we've decided against it," Max said. "We want to help you with Reshiram."

If Vulpix hadn't been so exhausted, she might've teared up. But as things were, all she could really feel was gratefulness mixed with annoyance. "I really appreciate it, but… This isn't going to be a battle

of numbers. Or a battle at all. I just have to convince Reshiram that I'm on his side, and I don't think he'll listen to anyone but me."

"Or maybe he'd be more inclined to listen if you had a group of pokémon backing you up, agreeing with what you say," Houndoom said. "How do you know either way for sure?"

"I don't know how I know… but I do," Vulpix said. "Please, I just… I really feel like I need to do this on my own."

Bulbasaur gave a little cough, bringing attention quite purposefully to himself.

Vulpix smiled. "Okay, on my own, but with Bulbasaur. We are a team, after all."

"Well, 'team leader?' What do we do now?" the galvantula on Luxray's back asked, looking to Max.

Max thought for a minute, then said, "The Western Guild might choose to turn their attention to you two first, if we don't come back and tell them something."

"That's true," Arcanine said, drooping sadly; even though he looked much more magnificent now than he did as a growlithe, his almost puppylike demeanor was the same as always. "But we can't just let them face Reshiram alone!"

Despite the darkness, Max met Vulpix's gaze and held it for a few moments. And, without breaking eye contact, he said, "I don't know if you just feel like you have to face Reshiram on your own out of pride or what, but if that's how you want it… We'll go back, tell Guildmaster Elgyem and the others that you somehow gave us the slip, but that you seemed for sure to be going to the Northern Guild. That'll give them no reason to change their course and try to find you themselves. And we'll join the battle ourselves, too. But since we're letting you do this on your own, I'll ask just one favor of you."

"What?" Vulpix asked cautiously.

"Don't die."

"Like Team Rebirth is gonna die," Bulbasaur said jokingly as he turned to look at Vulpix. "Goes against our team name. Right, Vulpix?"

She smiled. "Right."

"Well, this was a waste of time," the galvantula on Luxray's back said. "Come on, let's get going so we can get back and sleep."

"Like you haven't been sleeping this whole time anyway," Luxray said.

Max jumped back onto Arcanine's back. "Good luck, Team Rebirth!"

"You all, too!" Bulbasaur said as the group receded back into the darkness, the long legs of the evolved pokémon carrying them quickly back the way they came.

Once they were gone, Bulbasaur turned back to Vulpix. "You know, those roots I was hiding in before would make a really good sleeping spot, since we know we're not being followed now."

Vulpix smiled and gave in. "Fine, we'll sleep until dawn, then we're on our way again."

They wasted little time squirming in among the roots and eventually cramming in together, their shared body heat helping to keep the both of them warm even in the freezing temperatures.

But they'd barely settled down when Vulpix's mind, now free of the worry of Streya and her troops, drifted to other, equally unpleasant thoughts.

I… Bulbasaur trusts me so much. I haven't even told him what the memories are I regained. And he knows I have my memory and I'm

not telling him, but he's still traveling with me. Supporting me. And he even heard me say I made a deal with Kyurem, when I was talking to Max yesterday. And he still hasn't even asked about it. I'm definitely not the sort of person who deserves a friend like him… especially not after remembering what all I was as a human, what I did so thoughtlessly.

"Hey, Bulbasaur?" she asked, not sure if he was asleep yet or not.

"Yeah?" he asked in return.

"I'm… I'm sorry for not telling you yet. About everything I remembered. Tomorrow, I promise I'll tell you."

They were close enough that she could feel his heartbeat speed up, but when he responded, there was no trace of the excitement or anxiety or whatever else might have caused the increased pulse. "Whenever you're ready, Vulpix. I know it's probably been a lot to take in, so don't worry about it." Then, with a yawn, he said, "Well, good night, Vulpix."

She smiled and snuggled closer to him. *He's always there to support me, no matter what I do… I couldn't ask for a better friend.*

"Good night, Bulbasaur."

All right, enough hesitating, Vulpix thought as she and Bulbasaur walked silently on the next morning, following the bright flashes of flame that reflected against the dreary, low hanging clouds. *Though it's hard to tell with all these evergreens blocking our view, we've still got a ways to go… And yet at this rate, we'll find Reshiram before I work up the courage to tell Bulbasaur a thing. Why am I so scared?*

She took a deep breath. *I'm not scared of what Bulbasaur will think. I know him. He won't abandon me. I'm just scared of the truth. Scared of what I was, and scared of what that past is going to do to me now.*

And that's… that's why I have to tell him. Because he'll help me stop being scared of myself, and for myself.

Vulpix looked over to him and, seeing the movement, Bulbasaur turned and looked back at her, a calm smile on his face. "You ready?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Want to stop so we can talk?" Bulbasaur suggested.

"No, we need to reach Reshiram as soon as possible. If we keep going, we can reach where those flashes are by nightfall. So we keep walking, and I just… talk."

He moved slightly to the side, nudging her gently before breaking apart again. "Whenever you're ready."

She took a breath. Then another, and another. And only then did she begin.

"Honestly… There's not much to tell," Vulpix said, looking only at the ground immediately in front of her as she took each careful step among the snowy roots. "I grew up in a pretty normal family. Mom and dad. Two younger brothers. I was always sort of… distant around them. And even among my friends, I never really let myself get close to anyone. If something was wrong, I definitely never spoke about it. It wasn't just that I didn't want to trouble them. I… I didn't think they'd understand. Thought I was so different from everyone, thought that no one could possibly think what I thought about."

"And what was it you thought about?" Bulbasaur asked when she didn't immediately continue.

She sighed. "Lots of things, but they all seem so stupid now. So self-centered. I saw the problems in the world and thought I could think of ways to solve them better than anyone else, and thought the world was so stupid for not thinking like I did. I thought I was so right that I

didn't really care what was expected of me. I was… stubborn. And that could be good and bad. Bad because if I thought I was right, there was no convincing me otherwise. But good because I always kept at anything I felt was important. I'd never quit. Ever, until I finished. I was always proud of that.

"But I'm getting off track, because that's not what matters," she continued. "What really matters… I eventually got extremely depressed. I just couldn't see a point in living anymore. And it wasn't because I thought the world was inherently bad, or that people were inherently bad. But I was just one more person. One more person out of millions and billions. I wasn't unique, I'd never do anything special. And that idea tormented me more than anything else. I almost wanted to kill myself, but I knew that wouldn't do any good. If I wasn't anything special alive, I certainly wouldn't be dead. Plus, I was terrified of death, because I thought it was just… nothing. I still think it's just nothing, and that's frightening. Not the pain of death, but just the fact of it. Me, no longer existing. But even scared as I was of death, living was still nearly unbearable, because I really believed that I didn't matter, that snuffing my own life wouldn't be any different than snapping a twig off a tree."

Bulbasaur opened his mouth and made as if to protest, but he caught himself and bit back his words.

Vulpix was grateful, because she didn't know how she would've responded. She disagreed with it herself now. The person - or, rather, pokémon she was now couldn't even begin to comprehend such a train of thought. She had so much to live for, and she wanted to live her life. Yet her old self was in her head, too, with all its memories; and in those memories, it made perfect sense. Sad, despairing, perfect sense. And though she disagreed with it completely now, another part of her felt like she needed to defend her old self against her new self, prove that she wasn't so self-centered, so hopeless a person as she thought.

It's all too confusing… Which one is me?

She pinned her ears back against her head in discomfort, and a tremor went through her, as if she were shaking water from her fur.

"You okay?" Bulbasaur asked. "You can stop, if you want."

"No, I'm fine… Just confused. And scared." A chill went through her as she thought of the part that came next, the part that she wished had never happened. "When I was at the worst of that depression… I started hearing a voice. Like a whisper in my head. I thought I was just imagining things, trying to make myself feel important. Special. Different from other people. Because the voice… It promised me exactly what I wanted. Said I could be important beyond belief. Strong, powerful, world-changing. When I started to believe that it wasn't just my imagination, I felt hopeful for the first time in a long time. It sounded marvelous and grand. I loved my family, my friends well enough, but I would've dropped them all, dropped that whole life of mine in a second if I knew that sort of important life was waiting for me.

"I would've given up anything for it, done anything for it… It was that determination of mine. Once the idea was there, once I believed it was a real possibility, I couldn't have lived with myself if I gave it up… And that was the problem. Because there was a catch to the voice's promises. A horrible, terrible catch. It said that, in order for its promises to come true, I had to give myself to him entirely. I didn't know exactly what that meant, but it sounded like selling my soul. I didn't want that. And yet…

"… anything seemed better than just living out the rest of my days as no one. Even if I had to do every single thing it said, even if I had to do terrible things, even if I never got another moment again to be myself, I still wanted to be *someone* . I told the voice that, and… And I said yes. I swore to the voice. It gave me the words, and I swore over my body, mind, and spirit to him, so long as it held up its end of the bargain."

Vulpix chanced a look up at Bulbasaur, but quickly wished she hadn't. His eyes were wide as he stared at her, stock-still; at some

point in the conversation, they'd both stopped walking forward. And now they were frozen, as if caught in a single moment, that moment where Bulbasaur realized exactly what she had done.

"Vulpix… You gave yourself to Kyurem?" Bulbasaur looked like he wanted to cry, yet shock kept his eyes completely dry. "He didn't even force you, didn't even threaten you? You just… You just let him take you?"

Vulpix felt hot, angry tears coming to her eyes. "That's exactly what I did, and I hate it!" she said, her fur bristling. "And what's even worse is that I could've backed out even then! It's not like Kyurem took control of me right then. No ice appeared, no nothing. I was still just a human, still just sitting in my room, waiting for something to happen, for me to be whisked away to that greater life. But that wasn't it. He said that now that I'd given myself to him, there was one thing I had to do to seal it, to prove it and to start that new life. He said-"

A sob caught in her throat, choking the words off. In another moment, she angrily blasted the snow near her with a flamethrower, and blurted out immediately after, "He said I had to kill myself! He said I couldn't be reborn into a new life unless this life ended first, and I believed him! And I was terrified, and I was so, so, so scared, because I wasn't sure! Maybe I really was crazy and he wasn't actually there, or maybe he was lying, I didn't know!" She met Bulbasaur's eyes fully now and held the gaze, even as tears streamed from her own eyes. All the fear from back then was flooding into her, at least equally as terrifying as her newer fear of water. "Bulbasaur, I was so scared! I told him there had to be another way, that I couldn't kill myself, but he insisted! And then it was that stupid, prideful, pigheaded determination of mine! Because I hated my unimportant life, and I could see that an important life was the only thing that really mattered to me, and so I did it anyway! I did whatever it took!"

His eyes still wide with horror, Bulbasaur said, in barely more than a whisper. "You didn't."

All at once, Vulpix collapsed to the ground, hiding her face beneath her paws. "I did!" she shouted into the snow, more at herself than anyone else. "I tied a rock to my neck and drowned myself, because I had to do anything in order to have a life that mattered! I gave up my life and risked your entire world just because I wanted to feel special, and I hate myself for it! I can't stand it! I'd almost rather kill myself now than live with that fact, live knowing that I purposefully put you and everyone else in danger just because I was so stupid!"

"Don't say that!" Bulbasaur shouted right back at her, his voice mingling with hers in the dreary, snow-laden forest. "Because no one ever deserves to die, ever! And especially not you, because I know you, and you're not the sort of pokémon who'd do that sort of thing! I can't even believe that it's all true! It's gotta be some trick!"

Vulpix shook her head, though she still kept it buried beneath her paws. And, in a quieter voice, she said, "It's all true. I remember too much for it to be a trick. I know it was all me, that I did it all. But… but something went wrong. I died, and my mind and spirit got pulled to this world, just like Kyurem wanted. And I remember feeling like I was going to be swallowed up by him. I was so scared again, it was like dying all over again, right after I'd gone through the feeling of the last breath escaping my body, the water rushing in, my consciousness fading… And it was much more real, frightening this time. It was much, much worse than dying. Kyurem… He's just emptiness. Complete emptiness, complete cold, and it was going to swallow me whole. But he couldn't. Something held me back, and instead, I woke up as a Vulpix, and I nearly drowned again, and… you know the rest. Bulbasaur… I'm so sorry. I put everyone in danger. You and the Guildmaster and Charmeleon and everyone. Cobalion was exactly right about everything. I gave myself to Kyurem willingly. I'm just like Streya, except-"

"Vulpix, don't even start that!" Bulbasaur said. And Vulpix suddenly felt vines beneath her jaw, pulling her head up and out of her paws so that she had to look at him. "You're *nothing* like her. You care for other pokémon. You care for this world, and for as long as I've

known you, you've done whatever you could to protect me. You're *good*, Vulpix. I don't care who you were, you're completely different now. You nearly killed yourself just to get rid of Kyurem's influence on you, and now, you're going after Reshiram even though you know he's acting half insane now. You're doing everything you can just to make things right! Is that selfish?"

She sniffled a bit, and rubbed the tears away with the back of a paw. "I just… I just want to protect this world. Protect the world that allowed us to meet each other, that allowed me to be part of a wonderful guild. The world that gave me a second chance when I was so stupid the first time around. And even more than that, I just want things to go back to how they were, when we were just a regular team doing regular missions." She gave a strange, sobbing sort of chuckle. "It's kind of funny, isn't it? I got the wish Kyurem promised me. With Emma under Kyurem's control and Zekrom probably not in control of herself, me and Reshiram might be the only ones able to stop Kyurem. I'm more important than ever, but I just want to go back to being a normal team. Actually… It's not even that. I just want to be with you."

Bulbasaur smiled at her and touched his nose to hers affectionately. "You are with me. Right now. That's all that matters, right?"

Vulpix sniffled again. Then she stood up, layed down again next to Bulbasaur, and propped her head up on Bulbasaur's head.

I can feel his pulse going through his skull, she thought. *And I can feel my own pulse, too, my own blood pushing out, pushing against him back. We're both here, we're both alive.*

"Yeah," she said calmly. "We're together. That's all that matters."

I say that… And it's true. But there's more to it. Like always, there's more that I'm not telling him, not about my past but about what happens next. I could try to tell him. He'd want to know, but… It's just a suspicion. I don't know for sure yet, and I'll do everything I can to

make sure it doesn't happen. And that means we can't dawdle here any longer.

Vulpix got to her feet again and, in as chipper a voice as she could manage despite her unspoken doubts, she said, "Well, time to go find Reshiram, don't you think?"

Bulbasaur stood up and started to lead the way himself. "You bet. But I've still got one question." He completely believed that Vulpix had said everything on her mind, and didn't see through to the dark core of her now cheerful attitude. After all, she was genuinely happy just to be with him, making it more difficult to see to the full truth of things.

"Yeah?" Vulpix asked. "What's the question?"

"What's your name? You know, from when you were a human."

Vulpix closed her eyes as she walked, and unconsciously shook her head ever so slightly.

Bulbasaur saw the motion and frowned a bit. "Do you still not remember that?"

"No, I do," Vulpix said. "It's just… It doesn't feel right. Everything from that life, my actions, my name, my family - they seem like they belong to another person. They were me, and yet they weren't. I… I want to believe that it was another person, that I've changed since then. That waking up as a pokémon in this world and having to relearn everything changed me. Because I don't want to think of myself as the same person who would kill herself, especially not the sort of person who'd kill herself out of that sort of selfishness."

"Well, I think that's exactly what you should believe, because it's true," Bulbasaur replied. "I know you're not that sort of pokémon, I told you that before. You're you. Vulpix. To be honest, I don't think I'd be able to call you by anything else anymore, even if you did tell me your name."

She giggled a bit and said, "Actually, I don't think I could ever call you Sage. Sounds much too serious for you. You're just Bulbasaur to me."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean? Too serious?" Bulbasaur protested laughingly. "I'm about as serious as they come when I want to be!"

"Sure, sure," Vulpix said. "Like that time when you…" She trailed off as her eyes caught sight of something ahead, something… off. That was the only way she could describe it, because she couldn't quite pinpoint what exactly had caught her eye.

Bulbasaur looked to her, confused. "What's up?"

"Does it look weird up ahead to you?"

He squinted and, after a moment, said, "Yeah. It seems… lighter? In the far distance? I don't know, there are too many trees in the way."

"Let's hurry," Vulpix suggested before heading off at a trot.

The two moved closer and closer to the anomaly, each staying silent even as their horror grew as the sight slowly but surely made sense. They slowed the nearer they came, until finally stopping at the place where the forest so drastically stopped.

Grey stretched before them.

That was the only way to describe the sooty wasteland that stretched before them. Grey. The sky even matched, the clouds that spread like a roof above their heads, no doubt swelled with just as much ash as lay on the ground. The dark but rich green of pine needles, the deep browns of the trunks, and bright white of the snow on the ground and blanketing branches - all of it was gone. Drifts of ash accumulated, swirls of ethereal grey made the air dusky and stale, and even the swollen rivers of sudden snowmelt caused by the fires were dyed opaque by the destruction. The few trees that had not

been utterly burned lay sprawled in the ashes of their brethren, like corpses discarded after some great and hideous massacre. A few even remained upright, ghostly sentinels chained in place to look upon the horror for all eternity.

It's already been too emotional of a day for me, Vulpix thought as she tried to explain away the tears filling her eyes. But it was more than just that. This wasn't just any fire, not just something like the fire that had destroyed Bulbasaur's home. His home would grow back quickly; even in death, his parents had showed him that. But this…

It won't grow back. Not for years and years and year. Even the most hardy seeds couldn't have survived a blaze of this magnitude. It'll have to creep slowly in from the uninjured forest. How long will that take? How many homes will never grow back? How many pokémon died? The north may be inhospitable, but I know it's not empty. Anyone who lived here-

She suddenly gagged as her eyes drifted to a bit of darker grey on a nearby mound of ash, and she saw that it was the dead body of some poor soul, so mutilated by heat and flame that she could no longer even tell what sort of pokémon it had been.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be!" Bulbasaur suddenly shouted out, tears in his own eyes as well as he backed a bit into the shelter of the living forest. "Reshiram isn't supposed to do this! He's supposed to protect the land, not kill it!"

"That's why we've got to find him," Vulpix said resolutely as she swallowed her horror, trying to keep herself from gagging again. "Bulbasaur… if you want to wait here, that's fine. I'm the one who has to do this. And this place…" *It looks too much like what happened to your own home. I don't want you to have to relive those memories.*

He blinked away his tears. "No way. But let's just hurry before he does too much more damage, because it looks like that jerk is still at

it!" Without another word, he ran into the sooty waste, his eyes trained straight ahead on the bright flashes of massive fire attacks.

Vulpix followed him, glad for his company. In all truth, this place was just as much her nightmare as it was his. So much snow had been melted by the fires that it couldn't soak into the ground or refreeze; it had all gathered and was flowing northward, towards the nearest coast. Because of the soot in the water, they couldn't see how deep these rivers were, which would have made the going perilous at best if not for Bulbasaur using his vines to fine shallow places to ford. But even when the water was barely more than paw-high, the act of walking through it terrified her.

But I have to keep going. I have to make Reshiram see sense!

Even when they got hungry, neither of them stopped their trek through the seemingly unchanging landscape, continuing on even when all light left the sky and they were left in the pitch-black of another cloudy night.

Except it wasn't as black as it should've been. Now, the flashes of light that illuminated the clouds seemed right in front of them, and the flames of a burning forest loomed at the horizon. And above those flames, the tail of reshiram burned brightly, and the fire below tinged his pure white body an almost bloody red.

"Bulbasaur, you should wait here," Vulpix suggested as the two sped up, moving ever closer.

He shook his head. "I'm with you, no matter what."

She looked at him with concern, but instead of protesting, said, "Just promise you won't get too involved. If Reshiram attacks, I have the best chance. It'll still hurt, but my fur will keep me from getting too burned from his fire attacks."

Bulbasaur didn't respond, but Vulpix expected that he agreed, even if he didn't want to admit it.

In what seemed like no time at all, they found themselves standing at the edge of the bit of forest that was now burning, looking straight upwards at the being of fire that flew back and forth in a rage, torching both live and already burning tree alike. Just as Vulpix had expected, Bulbasaur hung back a ways - no doubt just as afraid of the burning forest in front of them as he was of the thing causing the fire.

Confident that Bulbasaur was far enough back to avoid trouble, Vulpix took a deep breath and shouted, "Reshiram!"

There was no response as the white beast flew just overhead, firing off another fire blast at a place in the blaze not too far ahead of Vulpix.

"Reshiram! Reshiram, you have to stop this! You're killing trees, you're killing pokémon, you're killing everything!" Vulpix shouted. "You're becoming worse even than Kyurem!"

Still no response.

Well, I can't think of any other way to get his attention… Here goes nothing. She took another deep breath and stoked the fire within her, recalling the feeling of the fire that had both awoken Reshiram and nearly taken her own life. She wasn't sure how, but ever since that fire, that stupid night where she'd nearly burned herself to death, she had understood the basics of the move overheat. Just like when she'd stepped into that fire, she had to give up concern for her own body, and just let the flames within her consume her, building and building to heights larger than she'd ever thought possible before.

She'd had little practice with it, so her technique was still rough at best, and the backlash greater than it should've been if she had the time to learn it correctly. But that didn't matter now: the power and range were both there, power and range that neither her flamethrower nor fire blast attack had. She let out the beam of heat, and it made contact with one of the rings around Reshiram's neck as he flew overhead.

That got his attention.

For the first time, he looked down and noticed Vulpix. He let out an earsplitting roar of rage and zoomed down to the ground, landing heavily among the rising smoke and burning trees of the forest just in front of Vulpix. Before Vulpix could even think to respond, he lashed out with one of his wings, sending Vulpix flying.

He's going to kill me, Vulpix thought as she got to her feet, even as she felt the rumbling of Reshiram's approach as he ran towards where she'd fallen. *But I can't run now. I have to try to get through to him.*

"Reshiram, I don't want to fight you! I don't want to hurt you, I just want you to be what the world needs you to be!" Vulpix shouted. "Come to your senses! You're acting like-"

"Silence! You want nothing more than to enslave me, to make me a puppet of Kyurem like yourself!" Reshiram yelled and, in another moment, he breathed a torrent of flame at Vulpix.

But he was tactless in his anger; the flamethrower went past her at first, and by the time he'd corrected himself, Vulpix had already dodged out of the way, closer to the burning forest in order to draw Reshiram as far away from Bulbasaur as possible. *I don't want him getting caught up in this.*

"Kyurem does have a hold on me, yes, but I'm fighting it!" Vulpix said. "I'm fighting him! I want him to be gone from this world, just like you do!"

"Lies!" Another fire blast flew towards Vulpix, but it went wide and instead further fueled the blaze that raged at Vulpix's back.

"Just listen to me!" Vulpix said, half choking on the ash filling the air.

Reshiram ran towards her, his jaws agape as he made to snatch her up in his mouth, wanting to snuff out her life with one swift bite. She

wouldn't be able to get away this time, that much she could tell. He was too focused, too intent on killing her.

Maybe Max was right to want to come along with me. I should've let him, she thought as she desperately tried to run, even knowing that in just another moment, the jaws would close and-

"Reshiram, she's telling the truth! You've become a monster!" Bulbasaur suddenly shouted.

Reshiram pulled up short, and something like sanity flickered into his eyes for just a moment as he whirled upon the small grass-type. Yet he didn't attack. Not yet.

"And who are you, to think that you have any part in this fight?" Reshiram asked threateningly.

"I'm her partner!" Bulbasaur said. "And I know she's doing everything she can to fight Kyurem, which is more than you can say! You've been sleeping these last ten years, and what do you do when you finally wake up? Destroy everything in your path!"

"Kyurem's hold lies on all these lands!" Reshiram roared. "His grip lies in the very snow itself, seeping into the trees the snow covers, poisoning the pokémon who live in it! It must be burned, destroyed! The balance must be returned!"

"Just stop and look this way, Reshiram!" Vulpix shouted at him from behind him. "Look behind me, at the fire! Look at what you've been doing! Is this really balancing anything?"

Reshiram turned and stared at the fires for a few moments, his expression suddenly blank. Then, in another second, he was enraged once again as he lowered his head to just above Vulpix and yelled, "This is your fault, human! You must be destroy-"

"She hasn't done anything!" Bulbasaur shouted, splitting Reshiram's attention and further disorienting a mind already confused with rage.

"You're the one who destroyed this forest! Not her! Vulpix has never killed another pokémon in her life, never even torched a blade of grass if she could help it!"

"Just look at it!" Vulpix shouted. She and Bulbasaur had both seen that the fire was their best bet at making Reshiram see sense. "Just look at the fire you created, Reshiram! If you honestly think you can defeat Kyurem by becoming an even worse monster than he is, then by all means, kill me now! I'll gladly die if you really think it'll help defeat Kyurem, but only if you really think that my death will achieve something!"

She stood her ground resolutely, even as doubts whirled through her mind, clouding her mind just like the ashes choked the air around her. *Kyurem still has his hold on me, my ice necklace proves that. I might be better off dead, really. Reshiram might know that I might be better off dead. He is the embodiment of the Spirit of the land, after all. If I truly am a threat, then he will not hesitate to end me.*

Reshiram looked at the fire, seemingly transfixed by its glow. Then he looked down at Vulpix, holding the gaze of the pokémon that was barely the size of his own foot, if that.

Then, he opened his wings wide. Vulpix heard Bulbasaur yell for Reshiram to stop, and she braced herself for the attack she felt sure to come.

Instead, a great wind suddenly surrounded her, filling the air so completely with ash that, for a few seconds, Vulpix couldn't breathe at all. Another gust passed overhead, and the air mostly cleared. As Vulpix gasped for air, she saw that the red light that up until now had lit the scene was completely gone, blown out as if it were nothing.

"The two of you are right," Reshiram said, his eyes still trained on the little gasping Vulpix before him. "I am achieving nothing. And I sense…" he paused, as if speaking this much was a great effort. "… I sense that the two of us must work together if we wish to have even a chance against Kyurem, Human."

And with that, the massive beast closed its eyes and collapsed to the ground, a cloud of ash rising into the air as the ground rumbled with his fall.

Even though both she and Bulbasaur should have been exhausted from the past few days, Vulpix couldn't sleep that evening. She managed to doze for a while, but sometime in the middle of the night, she gave up even that. Too many thoughts danced in her head, full of both hope and despair.

Reshiram's still sleeping, she thought to herself as she opened her eyes and walked over to the behemoth of a pokémon; Bulbasaur and she had bedded down in the ashes relatively far from him, so that they wouldn't be hurt if he shifted or suddenly awoke. *I hope he wakes up after his rest… I hope it's just that he's exhausted, after rampaging for a week. But do legends sleep the same as us, or is this something more? I thought that Reshiram and Zekrom circled the skies eternally… Did they ever sleep?What if Reshiram never wakes up? What if we've made things worse off by bringing him to his senses?*

She shook off that thought as she finally came to a stop just in front of the gargantuan pokémon, barely a tail's length away from Reshiram's nose. *No. He had to be stopped. What he was doing wasn't right. I won't doubt that decision, no matter what happens next.*

Vulpix glanced past Reshiram's head to take a look at the rest of him. Even in the dark of the night, she could tell that he was a truly spectacular pokémon, larger than any pokémon Vulpix had yet seen. His wingspan seemed longer even than an onix was long, and his tail even now glowed ever so faintly, with a warm orange light.

If only he'd wake up… I've yet to see Kyurem, but surely Reshiram would be a match for him.

"That's not true."

Vulpix jumped and turned her attention back to Reshiram's face, whose massive eyes were open and staring straight at her.

"That's not true," he repeated, barely moving his mouth as he spoke quietly, in just a murmur even by the standards of a pokémon Vulpix's size. "Kyurem has Zekrom already. Right now, I could not even touch Kyurem without being caught up and dragged into *it*, the *it* that was once our body. And that would be the end of everything."

Vulpix wasn't sure how to respond; she wanted to say that she was glad he was awake finally, but somehow, that seemed too cheery a thought when faced with these grim words.

Quite unexpectedly, she found herself saying, "Did you just hear what I was thinking? That you could beat Kyurem?" It wasn't the first thing she'd wanted to say to Reshiram. She wanted to be on good terms with him, not strike him as an interrogator, just some ignorant pokémon.

To her relief, he seemed unperturbed by her curiosity. "No. But… I can sense it. Bits of your thought." He paused, as if to let that information sink in. Then he said, "I know you have many questions. And I have things I must tell you, as well. But I cannot remain awake long now. I need to rest, for at least another day, perhaps longer. I need you and your bulbasaur friend to protect me, and wake me up if something comes to harm either you or me. Before I fall asleep yet again, though, tell me - you must be exhausted as well. What keeps you awake?"

"I was still worried about you. Worried that you might never wake up," Vulpix said. "And…"

And I'm worried about what's to come, she thought to herself, wanting to say the words but afraid that doing so would make them reality, something she could no longer push aside. *I gave myself to Kyurem fully already, once. He didn't threaten me, didn't force it as I suspect he did with the weather gods, who remember nothing of how exactly they first became puppets of Kyurem. I gave myself to him*

willingly, and a remnant of his hold still clings to me as a result. Do I… Will I even…?

Reshiram let out a sigh, his warm breath washing over Vulpix and, somehow, calming her. She suddenly realized that the necklace of ice had been growing tighter for some time now; only now, with the slackening it experienced from the warmth, did she understand that part of her worry had been caused unconsciously by that.

"I cannot truly read your mind, Human, I told you that already," Reshiram said. "Yet… You worry about your fate. Tell me, exactly how did you wind up with that necklace?"

Its origin was the last thing she wanted Reshiram to know, but nonetheless, she answered him. "I suspect it's part of Kyurem's possession of me. When I was a human, I promised myself to him, and even killed myself under his orders. He… or, rather, *it* owns me now, doesn't it? Is that why I woke up in this world with the necklace? Why I can't get rid of it no matter what I try?"

Reshiram closed his eyes. "I am sorry, but I'm afraid that is the case. You may not have a chance; your Spirit already belongs to Kyurem, that much I can see clearly. That much I saw from the moment you awoke me, and it is part of why I flew into the rage that I did. If you ever come face-to-face with Kyurem, your Spirit will be consumed, and there will be no chance at escape. Even if you avoid Kyurem as you undoubtedly have been until now, I suspect that one day, its pull will be too strong."

"Oh," Vulpix said, looking down at the ground. She'd suspected the truth for too long to mourn her fate now. She almost felt as if some part of her had known it would happen ever since waking up in this world.

"Yet you coming face-to-face with Kyurem is also the best chance you have, the best chance I have, and the best chance this world has," Reshiram added. "Somehow, you slipped from its control when you entered this world. You are the Hero who was able to awaken

me, so perhaps you have a chance. You are linked to my own Spirit now, the Spirit of this very land. If you can stand up to Kyurem for long enough to free Zekrom from its control, perhaps Zekrom and I will be able to end Kyurem before it claims its right to your Spirit."

No hope fluttered in Vulpix's chest; she could hear the undertone in Reshiram's voice, a note of despair, as if the words he spoke were just a child's story. "Do you truly believe that?" Vulpix asked.

"No," Reshiram said, without hesitation. "But it is true that facing Kyurem is our only chance, for it grows stronger by the day."

All of a sudden, that determination that had allowed Vulpix to survive up until this point filled her. Vulpix once again looked up and met Reshiram's eyes, looking into their seemingly bottomless depths without flinching. "Reshiram, tell me something. What is the Spirit, exactly?"

He seemed both surprised and intrigued by the question. He answered, "It is that which defines a being, that which truly gives it life. Without it, pokémon and humans alike would be like trees, just growing and living without any true thought, true emotion, true choices. Without it, this land… well, I suspect we'll see that soon enough, once Kyurem consumes me and, with me, the land itself. Everything will die. It shall become not unlike this ashen waste I have created. The land itself shall die, its Spirit ceasing to exist."

"But Spirits themselves - do they change?" Vulpix asked.

"Change, yes, but one Spirit remains always that same Spirit," Reshiram said. "They grow and mature and age, adapting based upon experiences. But it is still always the same core, building outward and outward on each new action, each new moment. It is less of change, and more of growth. It is not unlike a vine growing up a tree - it might take many paths, but it always has the same origin, and what has already grown and latched onto something does not change its position. It is only the new growth that is variable."

"But what if a vine is cut back so that it's essentially only a seed again?" Vulpix pressed desperately. "If it grows again, it won't take the same path again. It would have an entirely different outcome. Aside from that seed, it would be an entirely different vine, right?"

Reshiram frowned. "Yes, but that cannot happen with Spirits. You cannot simply destroy the experiences-"

"But that's exactly what happened to me!" Vulpix interrupted. "Reshiram, when I woke up here, I had no idea who I was. Up until I woke you up, I didn't so much as remember my name; all I had was the vague recollection that I'd once been human, and even that I didn't know at first. I had no idea how to act, not even by human standards. I had to completely rebuild myself. And now that I remember who I was as a human, I'm certain that that's not me! Not now! The me that I am now can't even begin to understand how the human me thought about everything! Don't you think that just maybe, that means that Kyurem's hold on me isn't guaranteed? His deal was with a completely different person, a completely different Spirit!"

For the first time in the conversation, Reshiram lifted his head off the ground, and he looked at Vulpix more seriously. "I… I honestly don't know what that could mean. If what you say is true, nothing like that has happened before. Even in the case of true amnesia, the Spirit is still mostly there - it builds in new and more drastic ways if the forgetfulness is permanent, but mannerisms and personality and other things built upon the core of the Spirit are still there. But making a deal with Kyurem, traveling across time and dimensions - I can't deny that something of your Spirit might have been lost. Perhaps Kyurem even consumed the bulk of your Spirit already, but left the core, and your new you grew from that. This is all just speculation, of course, but… There is a chance. The Spirit you have now is still the Spirit that was promised to Kyurem, and yet… it is also different, drastically so. Perhaps that is why you've been able to evade Kyurem for so long, perhaps it will allow you to keep yourself from being devoured."

Reshiram lowered his head to the ground, gently, not even raising a cloud of ashes when it made contact with the ground. "But your chance is minuscule. As I said, your Spirit is still the one promised to Kyurem, and that promise still holds. Your necklace is proof enough. I say that you have a chance, but I speak of it more as a chance of resisting Kyurem - not really of avoiding its grasp entirely. Even knowing that, will you fight Kyurem with me?"

Vulpix nodded. *Even if I didn't have even the smallest chance at surviving… Even then, I'd still do it. Like Reshiram said, Kyurem will get me sooner or later if I don't fight him now. And if there is a chance that I can save myself, and save this world that Bulbasaur lives in, keep him from being caught up in the death of the whole land, then…* "I'll do everything that I can, Reshiram. I promise you that."

Reshiram closed his eyes. "I am glad to hear it." And in another moment, he was once again fast asleep.

Vulpix walked slowly back to Bulbasaur, who was far enough away to have missed the conversation entirely, even if he had been awake. And as he slumbered on, she stood over him for just a moment, looking at him.

I can't let him know that I'm probably going to my death. He told me to tell him everything that's on my mind, but… I can't let him know. She felt tears forming in her eyes, and she quickly stepped away and lied down to avoid them falling onto Bulbasaur and waking him up. *Bulbasaur, I'm sorry, but this is one truth I must bear alone. Because for me, if there's one thing worse than bearing this truth by myself, it's seeing how much the truth would hurt you. I'm sorry, but allow me to be selfish… Just this once.*

Whoops. That chapter was exceedingly lengthy… oh well. It's Vulpix's darkest night, in a sense, so not much I could do about it.

In other news, college starts back up for me in just a couple days, so I'm going to be super busy getting moved in and stuff! But still, I'm going to do everything I can to get the next chapter finished in time. Because if I don't get this fic finished in time for NaNoWriMo, then Arceus help me, because I won't know what to do.

Also, gosh darn it, Vulpix and Team FireFang never got on actual-name terms. She's only on first name terms with Max, and that's only 'cuz he ONLY goes by Max… Honestly, I like the concept of species vs. personal names, but in practice, it's kinda awkward to write. Oh well.

And I realize I've been sort of inconsistent with pronouns for Kyurem. He's technically an 'it,' which is why Reshiram *should* only be referring to him as it. But I call him 'him' a lot, because that's sorta the default pronoun for sentient beings in the English language, so… yeah. As such, Vulpix and others either use 'him/he/etc.,' or they switch between masculine pronouns and it. Sorry for any confusion, hope it pretty much made sense anyway.

Chapter 31: Alexa and Cecil

Chapter Thirty-One: Alexa and Cecil

"What… What's happened here? What in the world is going on?" Alexa whispered as she and Cecil hid in some bushes.

Cecil looked solemnly at the sight before them: an entire army of pokémon surrounding the hill that covered the topmost part of the Western Guild, with the frontmost soldiers occasionally firing off attacks at the three entrances into the cave-like guild.

Eventually, the scyther shook his head sadly. "We shouldn't have come here for help. They can't even help themselves."

"There must be a hundred pokémon there!" Alexa said in hushed awe. "Outside of the guilds themselves, I don't think I've ever seen that many- Hey! Where are you going?"

Cecil, who had turned around and begun to walk away, paused and looked back at Alexa. "What? There's nothing we can do here. We should move on to the next guild, see if anyone there knows how to change us back into humans and send us back to our world."

"No, we shouldn't do that!" Alexa said, her feathers fluffing out in anger. *All those pokémon don't deserve to be trapped in there!* "We can't just leave the Western Guild to fall, Cecil! You like fighting, right? So don't you want to at least try to do something?"

"And what could I do?" Cecil said, looking away again as he swung a scythe into the ground, hard - Alexa couldn't tell if he was frustrated with the situation, or if he truly was itching for a battle. "I'm strong. But I'm only one pokémon. Even I can be overwhelmed. And what would happen to you? You'd be stuck out here, nowhere to go, with a broken wing. Dead meat if they stumbled across you. I don't want that, Alexa."

I'm glad I'm just the dead weight in this relationship… Can't do anything if I can't fly. But… "That still just doesn't sit right with me! Isn't there something we can do?"

"Nope nope, afraid not!"

Both Alexa and Cecil jumped and looked up into the branches above them, eyes falling upon a small emolga who sat there in the tree, a bright little dot of yellow, white, and black amidst the foliage.

Cecil immediately stepped between Alexa and the stealthy newcomer - a protective action that Alexa both appreciated and hated, since it made her feel more useless than ever. "What do you want? Are you with them?" Cecil asked, blades raised for battle.

"Nope nope!" Emolga said, shaking her head emphatically.

Cecil didn't buy it. "Then shouldn't you be hiding? We're close enough to those pokémon that they can probably see you where you are."

"They sure can!" the emolga said. "They even know I'm here, but they don't wanna divide their attention from the guild. I would've drawn them away from the guild before now now if that was the case!"

This emolga… Isn't she the guildmaster? Alexa thought, though she remained silent; she'd only seen the guildmaster in passing once before, at the very end of the Solstice Games, and this emolga didn't seem like guildmaster material. Alexa had heard stories of Guildmaster Emolga's eccentricity, of course. *But this? I can't believe the guildmaster could be smiling and just sitting around while her guild is being attacked.*

"Maybe there *is* a way to draw away some of the pokémon," the emolga continued, half muttering to herself, her pennant-like tail twitching back and forth rapidly as she looked at Cecil with increased interest. "Because you know know, Cody managed to divide the

army at the Eastern Guild by luring them away. Kyurem does seem to like its humans, yup yup!"

Cecil turned his head to look back further into their little, semi-concealing grove of trees right as another, much deeper voice said, "Emolga, who are you rambling to now? We need to come up with a plan."

In another few moments, the large shape shrouded by the branches and underbrush finally came into sight; and almost as soon as he did, his eye's and Cecil's met and both immediately went to their battle-ready positions.

"You!" Cobalion said. "You filthy, rotten scyther! You're that human who snuck up behind me! I can't forgive-"

"Oh, Coby Coby, quit making such a fuss!" Emolga said, flying down and hanging playfully off of one of his horns, the one that had once been cut off by the scyther that stood before him. Though it hadn't been long since then, the horn had already fully regrown. "We don't want them knowing there're humans over here yet yet, silly head! If they don't have any psychics as skilled at telepathy as the abra quadruplets, like we do, then they might not know what happened to their other group and they'll fall for the same trick as what happened with the Western Guild, hehe. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Cobalion ignored the electric pokémon hanging from his horn and continued to glare daggers at Cecil. "I find it doubtful that they haven't heard. The abra are abnormally skilled, but not completely unique. I've seen at least a couple psychic types among Kyurem's forces; surely they know of their comrades' defeat just as surely as they know that we are here, waiting for our chance to attack."

"Then why don't you attack?" Alexa asked, hopping out from behind Cecil, doing her best to make her voice sound only curious and unantagonizing. "I mean, you two are both strong. Unless you two are the only ones out here?"

"No, there are others," Cobalion conceded, lowering his guards slightly and meeting Alexa's eyes for a moment, apparently judging that Cecil posed no immediate threat. "But not many. Most are still out looking for Vulpix, and the few flying types that we've found can only in turn find so many of the guildmembers. And those that they *do* find still need time to get here. Right now, we're limited to about twenty-five pokémon outside the guild, with Guildmaster Emolga and I the only two of note."

"Now that's not nice nice, Coby!" Emolga said. "There's lots of strong guild pokémon here, yup yup!"

Cobalion rolled his eyes. "As much as I appreciate your optimism and your belief in the guild, we still lack the numbers to defeat an army of a hundred. And your deputy and the few pokémon within the guild can only do so much, bottlenecked as they are by the three exits. The only positive of the situation is that the army is likewise bottlenecked whenever they attempt to enter the guild. We'll have the Southern Guild coming soon to help, but… They may not arrive for another day, depending on how fast they're moving. I suspect the guild may fall before then, and if it does, they can keep the pokémon inside as hostages, keep us from doing anything to reclaim it. It's only a guess, but my instinct says we can't wait much longer.

"Which is why we use humans to draw some of them away right now, and then attack who's left!" Emolga said happily, and the turning to Alexa, she continued, "Your name was Alexa, right right? You and your friend wanna help help?"

I'm not sure… I want to help, but how much could we really do? Or, really, how much could Cecil really do? I'm all but useless.

She was about to say as much but, to her annoyance, Cecil once again spoke for her. "And get ourselves killed or captured for you? We have no interest in that."

"Hey, Cecil! Don't be so cold about it!" Alexa said, wanting nothing more than to flutter up to his head and start pecking him for being

such a jerk. "There are pokémon in there who might be depending on us, you know!"

Cobalion shook his head gently, and Emolga dropped off to the ground. He looked at her and said, "Actually, I agree with the scyther, as much as I dislike him. We're more outnumbered than the Eastern Guild, who at least were able to fight only half of their attackers at a time. We have no river between this army's three segments to slow them - if we fight one of them, then we fight them all. And as much as I hate to admit it… If Kyurem wants the humans so badly even now that both heroes have been revealed, then there must be more to them. We can't risk them getting captured."

"Oh, phooey, you're no fun!" Emolga said. And then, suddenly growing more serious, she said, "I need to save Zebstrika and all the others stuck in there, Cobalion. You know that. And I'll do whatever I have to in order to make sure that happens."

Cobalion sighed. "I understand how much Zebstrika and everyone else mean to you, Emolga. You forget - I was guildmaster before you, and for much longer than you. But we still can't risk a hopeless charge."

"But Coby!" she said, lapsing back into a whinier, more kiddish voice. "We've got to do something! I hate hate just sitting here!"

"We've got no choice, Emolga," Cobalion said. "We can make a dent in their army, but enough to make a difference? When the pokémon on the inside are no doubt already exhausted from defending with so few?"

"But I'm willing to try try, Coby!" Emolga shouted back, like a kid having a tantrum. "Whether you and the other guildmembers come with me is up to each of you, but I'm going!" Then, suddenly, she jumped off of the ground and flapped the winglike skin that draped from her arms and body, propelling herself into her original tree. She trained her eyes and ears towards the army and, in a moment, said, "They're doing something. I think they're going to attack the guild,

now! Coby, I'm getting the others and we're going, I don't care what you say!"

"Emolga, wait!" he said as Emolga suddenly zipped off between the trees. She paid him no heed and continued on her way.

I just… I want to help. I didn't interact with the guilds all that much, but guild pokémon are some of the nicest I've ever met. But really, what can we do? Cecil's right, so few pokémon can only do so much.

Cobalion wrenched his gaze from Emolga's retreating form and instead looked to Cecil and Alexa; he was tenser than ever, but his alarm was no longer directed towards Cecil in the least. There were bigger things to worry about. "You two should stay here. Or, better yet, get out of here. I don't have high hopes for our chances, but I'll be joining Emolga anyway."

Before Cobalion could turn to leave, Cecil lowered his scythes and stepped forward. "Will you answer just one question first?"

Cobalion's eyes narrowed; though not worried about Cecil, he clearly still wasn't fond of the scyther. "What?"

"Can we change back?" he asked. "Alexa and I. Is there any way we can go back to our world? Back to our lives?"

Cobalion glared for another moment, then seemed to relent. "I don't know," he said, "but your best bet is Reshiram and Zekrom. They are more tied to this land than any other pokémon, and they will know best about how you got here in the first place, and if there's any way to reverse it. But Zekrom is likely under Kyurem's control already, and Reshiram may be as well - we don't know. It won't be as simple as just finding them and asking them."

"I don't suppose we'll be able to do much without your help and that of the guilds, will we? Not if we end up having to fight Kyurem to get back home, at least," Cecil said, glancing down at Alexa. "Guess I can lend a blade or two, so that you'll be around to help out later."

"I won't deny, we could use the help," Cobalion said. "Though I don't approve of your… tactics, you'd improve our chances. What I said about it being important for you to stay out of Kyurem's clutches is true. If you want to battle, at least run if things are going bad."

Cobalion waited for a response, but Cecil said nothing. Eventually, Cobalion gave up on any confirmation of understanding, and turned and ran off after Emolga without another word.

Once he was out of earshot, Cecil looked back to Alexa. "You'll stay hidden here, right?"

Alexa dug at the ground with a talon, loathing flooding through her. She didn't like battling, but she didn't like just sitting around being able to do nothing, either. "Not much else I can do, right?"

Cecil didn't respond.

"Promise you'll at least do what Cobalion said and run if it goes badly?" Alexa asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, I promise."

Alexa heard a noise out towards where the army was, and both she and Cecil looked that direction. The first pokémon of each of the three divisions of the army were beginning to go into the tunnels; but, at the same time, another group of pokémon emerged from another small grove of trees, Emolga zipping through the air ahead of them, sparks trailing after her.

From another spot a bit closer in the grove, Cobalion came charging towards the army, horns lowered threateningly, a true force to be reckoned with.

"I'll be off, then," he said with a grin. "Wish me luck." And just like that, he was gone, staying low to the ground and blending in with the grass such that the army of pokémon - most of whom were focused on Emolga and Cobalion - didn't so much as see him until he was

already among them, swinging his scythes left and right as he began to mow down pokémon.

Alexa peeked through the bushes, watching the fight as it unfolded. The initial onslaught of Cecil, Cobalion, Emolga, and her guildmembers was largely successful; between the raw power of those main three, and the fact that they were attacking only one of the three divisions of the army at first, they were able to overwhelm those they fought.

But the tides of battle quickly shifted. The other two units of the hundred pokémon army broke off their attacks on the entrances of the guild and moved to aid the besieged unit, leaving only ten pokémon to guard each of the two exits.

And though Cobalion and Emolga were far stronger than any pokémon they fought against, and though Cecil and a number of the guildmembers were themselves capable fighters, eighty against twenty-five were practically impossible odds.

"I hate this," Alexa mumbled to herself as she watched Cecil and the others as they were surrounded, fighting to their limits just not to be completely overwhelmed. "I just… Maybe I can help."

Slowly, she tried stretching out her wing, which she'd otherwise been keeping pinned close to her side. She managed to stretch it out fully, but even as gently as she did it, that little movement still was so painful that her wing shook.

She blinked back the tears of pain. *I'm no doctor, but that wing's still not healed. But… I* am *a pokémon, so I heal fast, and it feels better then when I first broke it… When was that, a week ago? Just a week? Have we really been through so much just since then?* She shook her head, banishing that train of thought; she had more important things to occupy her. *I think… I think I could fly. It'd hurt a lot, but I could risk a little. Nothing fancy.*

Alexa looked out to the battle. Unsurprisingly, it was going badly. A huge swath of the enemy had already been taken down, but more just kept on coming, and more than half of the Guildmaster's pokémon were down for the count already.

I have to do something, or else Cecil's gonna get killed! She braced herself and, despite the pain, managed to flap her way up into one of the lower branches. But she immediately began to tremble; it was just too much.

As much as I want to do something… I can't. I just have to watch it play out, because I'll be of absolutely no use, even if I can manage to stay in the air for very long.

Something different was happening in the battle, now that she blinked back the water in her eyes and turned her attention back to it. Cobalion and Cecil were fighting on as usual, but Emolga had just broken off, sparks still raining off of her and making her a beacon even in the daylight. She flew towards the ten pokémon guarding the nearest entrance, using her electricity as propulsion. But, rather than attack them, she flew right over their heads and into the guild, just barely missing their last-minute attacks as they tried to stop her.

Cobalion bellowed something and began to cut through the crowd in the same direction, quite literally trampling the enemies in his way. Cecil, too, managed to break away from his current opponents, flying up and out of the melee with wings that, though somewhat tattered from attacks, were still apparently functional enough. In another moment, Cobalion was in the guild, with Cecil and one other guild pokémon following in his wake. All the others from the guild were already knocked out.

Alexa let out a sigh of relief. *At least they get a bit of a reprieve… And if Kyurem's army attacks again, maybe with Cecil, Cobalion, and Emolga down there, they'll have a chance of holding them off until the Southern Guild gets here.*

There was a lull in the action as Kyurem's army regrouped, then redivided - now only twenty or so were at each entrance, though that still added up to sixty battle-ready pokémon. A few more pokémon gathered up the unconscious guild pokémon and guarded the bodies, in case they woke up and caused trouble.

I just hope those poor guys are okay… They really took a beating. They're not dead, are they? Pokémon don't die easily, but… No, they wouldn't guard dead bodies. They'll be okay.

Alexa found herself hopping from foot to foot anxiously, and did her best to stop herself, at least for the moment. But she wanted to do something to help, but she still couldn't think of anything she could do. *If I could fly… but I can't, not yet, not well enough. Even if I could, the best thing I could do is maybe fly south and hope I could run into the Southern Guild and tell them to hurry up.*

"I'm so useless!" she muttered to herself.

But she was quickly jerked from her annoyance as she noticed motion once again, and saw pokémon beginning to walk into each of the guild entrances single-file.

Just watch. They'll be stopped. Emolga and Cobalion and Cecil, and probably the deputy that's in there, too - they'll stop them. They're only coming one by one. They can stop them… Can't they…?

The pokémon continued to flow in unhindered. Not even the slightest sound of resistance or battle echoed out to Alexa. Everything was silent, almost eerily so. Eventually, all the pokémon were in the tunnels to beneath the hill, except for five still stationed at each of the exits.

"But… What's going on? Didn't the tunnel bottleneck work both ways?" Alexa whispered to herself. "Does Emolga have some other plan, or… She's gotta know what she's doing. Unless she and the others were more injured than they looked?"

All of a sudden, light emerged from the cave - a bright, blinding light that lefts spots dancing in the center of Alexa's vision, even though she was far away from the source. A loud crack followed soon after, like a peal of thunder that literally rumbled the ground, not just because of its roar but because it literally came from *below* the ground.

Alexa watched anxiously, blinking away the spots, as the pokémon at the entrances stumbled around blindly - nearly all of them had been looking into the cave when the light flared up. In another moment, the sound of chaos and battle flared up within the caverns, and Alexa once again began to hop from foot to foot, even occasionally spreading her wings as if to fly, though it still hurt to do so.

Please let this be part of a plan. Our plan. Oh please oh please-

She quickly saw that she needn't have worried. Pokémon - mainly ice types - were beginning to trickle out of the guild now, groping ahead of them and tripping more often than walking, having quite clearly been caught in the blast of light with their eyes open. Soon, it became clear that they were being driven out by the guildmembers, all of whom seemed perfectly able to see.

Alexa grinned as much as her beak would allow her. "I don't know what they did, but they did it!" she practically shouted as she watched dozens after dozens of non-guild pokémon fleeing the guild. Admittedly, not all of them came out - Alexa suspected some were probably still managing to fight, or perhaps the guild was capturing as many as they could manage - but there was no doubt which way the battle as a whole had gone. While outside the guild, the numbers had been enough for Kyurem's army to have the advantage. But inside, something had given Emolga and the others the upper hand.

She didn't have to wait long for Cecil to return; from her spot in the trees, she watched him running up, extremely beat up but, at the very least, still energetic enough to come find her.

"Alexa?" he called out tentatively as he poked around in the bushes, expecting to find her on the ground somewhere.

"Up here!" she chirped happily. "Are you okay? No one's hurt too badly, are they?"

He relaxed a little bit, relieved to see she was fine. "I'm okay, and so is everyone else, for the most part. No one's dead, at least. But, um, how did you…?"

"… get up here?" Alexa prompted when he trailed off. She held out her wing, wincing at the pain, and said, "Probably not one of my better ideas… Wing's not feeling too great at the moment. But anyway, what in the world happened in there? What was that light?"

"It'd be easier for me to show you," Cecil said as he held up a scythe, blunt-side up, so that Alexa could hop down without have to fly anymore. It was only now that she realized that he was probably more injured than he made off to be - his scythe was shaking just from holding it up in the air like that, and parts of his bug-like carapace were torn completely through and oozing a weird, purplish sort of blood.

Still, he wouldn't like it if I let him know how bad he looked, Alexa thought as she hopped on to his scythe, and from there onto his shoulder. *He'll be better in no time, so there's no sense worrying him or being worried myself.*

"That's what happened," he said as he entered the guild, looking upward at the ceiling.

Alexa wasn't very much liking being underground, but she managed to push aside her insecurities about it and glance upward as well, seeing threads of glowing metal burning brightly in the ceiling.

"Is that how the guild is lit?" Alexa asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Cecil said as he walked further down the passageway, before coming to the massive rom that must have occupied most of the large but unobtrusive hill that was all the guild appeared to be from the outside. At its center, a large amount of the glowing threads converged in a bright sphere that occasionally sizzled with electricity. Cecil, too, was staring up at the orb embedded in the ceiling as he continued, "Once we were inside, Emolga had us go a bit deeper and close our eyes, while I guess she held onto that. She took all the electricity in it into herself to make the whole place dark. Then, when she heard all of Kyurem's forces come in, she blasted the thing with all the electricity she could muster. She's absolutely exhausted from it, but it did the trick - blinded anyone who didn't cover their eyes in time, which was most of the attackers. After that, all we had to do was chase them out."

Alexa cocked her head to the side as she looked at the orb, still kind of confused. "But if that's the case, why didn't Emolga fly in here before today and pull that stunt?"

Cobalion - who had been speaking with a zebstrika in another part of the room, whom Alexa assumed was the deputy she'd heard about - now came over and, apparently hearing the question, said, "She didn't know it would work. None of us did. We'd never used more than a minimal amount of electricity on our lighting here. As far as we knew, it might have broken from that much energy coursing through it. And if she'd made that gamble and it hadn't worked, the guild would've been all but lost, with the enemy having already infiltrated."

They all paused, no one really knowing quite what to say yet. Eventually, though, Cobalion spoke up once more. "Your name was Edge, wasn't it, human?"

Cecil started to nod, but Alexa batted him in the head with her good wing. He looked at her, smiled a bit, then said, "Actually, I'm going by Cecil now."

"Well, Cecil, I can't say I approve of you. Not since being on the receiving end of such a dirty tactic like a surprise attack, all for what I can only assume was some greedy goal of yours. Feel free to correct me if I am wrong in this assumption."

Cecil stayed silent, but Alexa didn't want him to go with any defense. "He didn't mean to be such a jerk, really!" she said. "He just wanted to be stronger. Not like that excuses him for being such a jerk, but still!"

Cobalion looked to her. "You, too, are a human, am I correct?"

"Yes!" Alexa said. "We were friends in real life. And now we just want to get back home, really! And Cecil's sorry for what he did. Right, Cecil?"

Cecil looked down at the ground for a few moments. Then, meeting Cobalion's eyes, he said, "I don't regret fighting to the best of my abilities, or even ambushing you to get what I wanted. But… I am sorry. Sorry that my actions ended up killing some of the pokémon I fought along the way. That's the only thing I regret."

"I'm glad for that, at least," Cobalion said. "But it still remains that you've killed pokémon. That's never acceptable. Normally, you'd be locked up for that. The guilds don't imprison pokémon often, but in cases such as yours, that's the only option."

Neither Alexa nor Cecil said a word. Partly because both knew that Cobalion was right, but also because they could tell that there was more to what he was saying.

"However, there are more important matters that need to be dealt with, and it appears we have the same goals," Cobalion continued. "If you two wish to turn back into humans, we will have to find and possibly rescue Reshiram and Zekrom, which may also include fighting Kyurem itself. So far, humans are the only ones who have proven themselves capable of getting rid of Kyurem's control, with Cody's own awakening being perhaps the only exception, to an

extent. So I offer you a deal - fight with us, and we shall ignore your sentence, either until this fight with Kyurem is over, or until you have left our world and returned to your own for good."

Cecil nodded. "That's fair enough."

"And what about me? Guess I don't even matter?" Alexa asked. *I'm glad Cecil's been forgiven, but I don't exactly like being forgotten!*

"We'll need your help, too, if you'd be willing to give it," Cobalion said.

"Are you sure about that?" Cecil immediately asked Alexa. "Your wing-"

"-will be just fine, as soon as I get some treatment!" Alexa insisted. "After this whole battle fiasco, I don't want to just sit around and let you look after me, Cecil! I'll go crazy, at this rate!"

Cecil let out a little chuckle. "Crazier, maybe. You've already got enough crazy."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, laugh it up!" Alexa said. "Anyway, Cobalion, I know a bunch of pokémon are hurt right now, but can I at least get my wing looked at? I know I can't expect immediate results or anything, but I need it to start getting better if you want me to do anything to help." *And I just really want to fly again! I don't know how I'm going to live without it as a human!*

Cobalion nodded. "When you're ready, head down that tunnel," he said, gesturing with his head to one of the many offshoots that led to further down in the guild. "We probably have a day until the Southern Guild gets here, but that should be long enough for the healing pokémon to get your wing working, on a very rudimentary level. It still might hurt, and you won't be able to do anything fancy, but it'll have to be enough. After this attack on both the Western and Eastern Guilds, we've decided we cannot possibly wait around and allow Kyurem to continue to amass his army. The Eastern Guild is

already moving in on the Northern Guild to attack; we will hurry to provide backup for them as soon as possible. I know both of you are injured at the moment, but we'll expect you to be along, since you seem to be willing."

Both Cecil and Alexa nodded, and Cecil asked, "Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Only that I'll be keeping my eye on you," Cobalion said as he turned and began to walk away. "We might need you, but that doesn't mean I like it, nor does it mean that I trust you."

Alexa and Cecil looked at each other and, once Cobalion was gone, Alexa muttered, "Well, that was ominous. You aren't exactly on his good side."

Cecil grinned. "That's probably what comes of sneaking up on him, attacking him, and slicing off his horn."

"Be serious, Cecil!" Alexa said as she nudged him with her good wing, though she was smiling, too. "But guess we don't have much of a choice but to cooperate, huh?"

"We could always run away," Cecil said, a bit more serious now. "Once we've both had basic treatment tonight, we could run away while everyone's sleeping. Let the other humans take care of things."

Let the others take care of it? Alexa thought as she looked at him for a few moments; he simply stared back. He'd never had a problem holding other people's gazes, so he wasn't exactly put off by Alexa looking at him for so long without saying a word. *That doesn't sound like Cecil at all! He's not one to avoid a fight, especially not since coming to this world! Up until a few days ago, he was chasing after Reshiram himself!*

"You're not offering to run away with me just to keep me out of trouble, are you?" Alexa asked. *That's the only thing that's changed, after all. Ever since I told him everything about our last day and he*

started remembering it. Now he feels like he has to look after me… And I can't deny that I've needed some looking after recently, no thanks to him.

Cecil shrugged, unintentionally nearly knocking Alexa off of his shoulder in the process. "This Kyurem guy seems pretty dangerous. That's all I'm saying," he said as he began walking to the tunnel Cobalion had pointed to for medical treatment.

"Cecil, we can't just back down from this, and you definitely can't just back down for me!" Alexa said, puffing up. "I mean, I can't say I'm looking forward to any fight against Kyurem, I mean, I didn't even stand a chance against Tornadus back when he almost got me! But it's just as much our fight as the other humans', right? Maybe even more than then, because last time I talked to Vulpix, she didn't even want to be a human again. Didn't remember anything about it! Of course, now she might be with Kyurem and all, but that just makes it more important that we help out. There's only, what, four of us humans for sure who aren't working for Kyurem?"

As they exited the tunnel and entered the large infirmary room at its end, Cecil said, "Well, just think about it. Sometimes there's things more important than fighting no matter what. After all, getting back to our world won't mean a thing if we're dead."

Some of the medical pokémon were already rushing up to them, trying to separate them to get Cecil to more superficial care and Alexa herself to pokémon with more specialization with internal injuries.

They went without any fuss, of course, but as they parted, Alexa found she was shaking. This time not due to any pain in her wing, but due to her little bird heart fluttering wildly against her ribs.

Maybe I'm more scared about what's to come than I let on. But… I always admired Cecil for his strength, and his determination. And he's still like that, even as a scyther. I'm not going to hold him back, especially not when we're needed. We'll fight, along with the rest.

Sorry I'm late, and sorry it's maybe not a chapter worth waiting for! I really just tried to get it written quickly, since I've been so busy this first week back at college. Classes themselves aren't that bad, it's more all the activities I'm in that are a hindrance to this fic. That, and work. Although I can write at work, it's just very distracted and not top-quality writing.

Things will slow down a bit after next week, probably, but even after that… I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to guarantee my usual one chapter per week. I'm still going to try my hardest to get it out as quickly as possible, though! If you're ever wondering how far ahead/behind I am, check out this story's section on my profile - I tend to keep it pretty up-to-date with the next chapter's progress. But I don't want to sacrifice my social life too much for the sake of this fic, nor do I want to sacrifice my studies. Especially since I REALLY need to get Japanese down this year, since I'll hopefully be studying abroad in Japan next year. *fingers crossed*

Also, if I haven't been responding to questions in reviews as much lately, that's also because of how busy I've been. Trust me, I'm still reading them! Life's just SO crazy for me right now, in not an entirely bad way.

Anyway, thanks for reading, and sorry again that I may not be able to hold up to my weekly update reputation!

Chapter 32: Siege of the North Part 1

Chapter Thirty-Two: Siege of the North Part I

Cody dodged to the left, easily avoiding the seel's attack, and fired off a thunderbolt at the slower pokémon, finally knocking it out.

He didn't allow himself a moment to catch his breath, though, or to complain about how tired he was. He didn't have the time, and things were too hectic. All around him, battle was raging, and it was raging in perhaps the fiercest way possible. The enemy - rank upon rank of pokémon, mainly ice types and others who could similarly withstand the biting cold of the North - was absolutely ruthless, not holding back at all. Pokémon weren't just being knocked out; they were dying, being slaughtered if they turned their backs to the enemy even for a second.

For the enemy, the fight wasn't so bad. Any seriously injured pokémon could retreat into the Northern Guild, a massive structure of cold, sloping curves and sharp edges of ice; no doubt they had medical pokémon in wait there, ready to do emergency aid and get troops back on the field as soon as possible.

But Cody and all those he fought alongside weren't so lucky. Even with all of the Eastern Guild and a good half of what had been the true Northern Guild on their side, they were still outnumbered and, perhaps more importantly, much more hindered by the snowy ground and freezing wind. They too could retreat back to their healers, but without any good way to shelter from the cold, it wasn't as much help as it might have been.

We should've waited to attack, Cody thought to himself as, after a moment, he caught sight of Isola's head above the bulk of the battle and started towards her, using his natural tendency to zigzag to his advantage to slip through the battlers. *We really should've waited to attack. I know we don't have any supplies left, but the Western and*

Southern Guilds should be here by morning. We could've gone hungry for a day and battled on empty stomachs, if only to avoid this slaughter.

And slaughter was the only way to describe it. Cody had never seen this many pokémon battling at once, and he'd never seen them battling to kill like this. Battling to the point of unconsciousness was usually plenty - a criminal could get away in the time before a pokémon could recover enough to follow, and likewise, a knocked out pokémon could be easily enough brought back to a guild and contained for as long as necessary.

But all of us know that a pokémon that survives now may just fight another day, Cody thought as he saw an opportunity and lashed out at a pokémon who was missing the telltale red scarf that all of the Eastern and good Northern Guild were wearing, as was arranged before the beginning of the battle. With so many pokémon involved, it was the only way for sure to distinguish between friend and enemy. And the new Northern Guild, Kyurem's Army, had apparently come up with the same concept, but in a much different way - each had a ring of ice somewhere around their body, like bracelets and necklaces of crystal. They weren't like the ice Cody remembered seeing on Vulpix. Unlike that stuff, this was breakable.

Still, if there was anything that more delineated the fact that this war had escalated beyond anything this mostly peaceful land had ever seen, then this contrast between hard, pale ice and soft, bright cloth was it.

Isola!

He made it back to her just in time to see a liepard lunging for her, his fangs bared as he tried to bite down on Isola's fragile neck. Ryan and Lisa were some ways away, fighting their own battles; it was only thanks to a desperate but powerful headbutt on Cody's part that the liepard was knocked back to the ground. Not missing a beat, Isola finished him off with a drill peck, knocking him out.

They both exchanged a look, but neither went in for the kill; though many pokémon were doing so, Isola and Cody couldn't fight that way. Nor could Lisa and Ryan, for that matter. Like many guild pokémon and, from what Cody could tell, even a number of the enemy, killing just didn't sit right with them. Instead, Isola and Cody left the liepard and quickly cut through the pokémon standing in between them and the other half of their team.

Cody used his evasiveness to his advantage, dodging attacks and getting behind enemies while Isola held their attention, then attacking with the few attacks he had at his disposal. Tackle, headbutt, thunderbolt - not a lot, but by now, he did all three attacks well, and he could pack enough of a punch when he needed to.

"Now THIS is a battle!" Lisa said as she saw Isola and Cody coming up. "Right guys?"

Of course. Only someone like Lisa could possibly enjoy being exhausted and hungry and cold and still having to battle.

"If you say so, Lisa" Ryan said as he slapped his long tail against the ground, slinging snow into the faces of three oncoming pokémon. Before the cloud of snow had subsided, Lisa had already dove in and started fire-punching her way through the ice types that had been stupid enough to try to attack Team Misfits.

That's the one advantage we all have in this battle, Cody thought with just the slightest hint of a smile as he dove after as well, headbutting a snorunt. *They fight individually, without any real strategy. We have the Guildmaster Elgyem teleporting about and directing us, and our teams work as units that are difficult for even twice the number of individual enemies to overcome.*

The snorunt countered with an ice beam, which met Cody's follow-up thunderbolt midway, causing a small explosion with enough force to send the both of them flying away from each other. The snorunt and another of the three pokémon came at him again, but Ryan

managed to stop them, his iron tail attack knocking out the snorunt completely and grazing the other enough for Isola to finish him off.

"Still avoiding water pulse?" Ryan asked with a chuckle, ignoring a trickle of blood that was dripping from one of his massive ears, staining his eternally dirty fur and making it filthier still.

"I learned it a day ago, Ryan! While we were on our way here, not even in a good training place," Cody said as he dodged aside from a combusken's ember attack. The conversation was put on hold as Team Misfits went to the task of defeating the combusken and four other pokémon that had come at the same time, though Cody's tail got rather burned in the process.

The burn hurt, but he ignored it as he continued to Ryan as if nothing had happened, "I haven't had time to get the water pulse attack right!"

"Well, they say practice makes perfect," Ryan said as he himself gathered a ball of water in a paw, seemingly out of nowhere; with a flick of his arm, he flung it forward, and it was in a sort of wave shape by the time it hit their next, oncoming opponent.

The opponent, a chatot, seemed rather disoriented for a moment, and then he promptly attacked one of his own allies in the back.

"See? Useful," Ryan said as he went to task with Isola, finishing off the two pokémon.

Cody angrily thunderbolted the next pokémon to come near him, stunning it and giving Lisa an opportunity to go in for the metaphorical kill. "But this is a *real* battle, Ryan! I can't just practice!"

"Aw, just try it!" Ryan said, though the conversation had distracted him long enough for a sealeo to get behind him and throw an ice ball at him, striking him in the back.

Lisa and Isola quickly came to his rescue while Cody turned in the direction that they had now left unguarded, facing off against five more pokémon that were coming up. He couldn't do much about them by himself, but maybe-

"Oh, what the hell, we're gonna die here anyway!" Cody recalled Ryan's water pulse instruction from yesterday, focusing on the feeling of snow beneath his paws and water in the air. In another moment, a sphere of water had appeared in front of him. Still small compared to Ryan's, but it'd have to do. With a twist of his body, he slammed it forward with his tail, and the bulk of the water hit two of the oncoming pokémon, though in a much messier, less effective way than Ryan had managed.

Ryan was getting to his feet right then, and the minccino ran forward, ignoring his most recent injury as he came to help Cody fight off the new attackers. "Nice try, but focus the water more when you actually hit it!" he said as he ran past and let out a wave of electricity all around him, stunning the four of the five pokémon while Cody followed up behind, aiming a thunderbolt at a deliberd and knocking out the already paralyzed pokémon.

"Focus more on the water's motion! You have to actually make it a *pulse!"* Ryan continued, emphasizing the last word right as he tail-slapped an oncoming absol in the paw, making it stumble and causing the razorwind it had been preparing to veer off in a different direction, quite conveniently hitting one of the absol's allies.

"Yeah, well, that doesn't really explain how to do it very-"

Cody tried to dodge the incoming peck attack from a swablu, but he saw the pokémon flying at him too late. Isola quickly dispatched it as she and Lisa came back over to help the guys on their team out. But the peck had done its damage.

And that was my shoulder blade! he thought as he winced with pain. *So much for using my agility to my advantage… This is going to hold*

me back a bit. Not that it matters much at this point… Things aren't going well.

Compared to the rest of the guild, Team Misfits was fighting exceptionally well, holding their position despite the constant onslaught of pokémon. But now, their competence turned out to be a bad thing. What had once been the front line of their battle formation had now mostly fallen back, leaving Team Misfits nearly surrounded by the enemy.

Lisa must have noticed at the same time Cody did, because she suddenly headed back towards the rest of the army, iron-tailing an enemy out of the way in the process. "Come on!"

Cody wanted to, but he was already being attacked by an ursaring, and it was all he could do to avoid the monstrous pokémon's powerful slash attacks. Ryan and Isola were similarly held up by their own opponents, unable to turn and run without exposing themselves to further attack.

The opponents slowed their attacks for just a moment, grinning at each other.

"One of the humans we're supposed to look out for is a zigzagoon, isn't it?" the ursaring said as he looked down at Cody. "We've got orders to capture any suspected humans. So what do you say? Come quietly, or should I beat you until you don't have a choice?"

Over my dead body! Cody said as, against his better judgment, he leapt towards the ursaring in something not unlike an impromptu spark attack - a mix between his own headbutt and thunderbolt attacks. The ursaring, caught off guard, was hit right in the gut, and he doubled over in pain.

The moment of calm among the opponents ceased as they all closed in again. Cody dodged frantically and did his best to ignore the attacks that did hit, but he was too overwhelmed.

Where are Isola and Lisa and Ry…

He trailed off mentally as he saw the three of them being similarly overrun.

A tackle attack from some larger pokémon hit him, and he fell to the ground and stayed there, unable to catch his breath quite yet.

He saw the pokémon closing in above him, and for a moment, he closed his eyes. *Well, this is it. No help's coming now, and they have no reason to not kill Isola and Lisa and Ryan… Why does it have to end this way?*

He curled up in on himself as one of the larger pokémon - probably Ursaring - picked him up by the scruff of his neck, half choking him.

I can't just sit here! I need to help my team!

He opened his eyes and loosed a thunderbolt, but he couldn't muster anything more powerful then some painful sparks. Ursaring shook him violently, and he was forced to stop.

Ursaring stopped the shaking once Cody seemed to give up, but Cody wasn't going to give in so quickly. As soon as the shaking had stopped, he again started with a thunderbolt. Again, he couldn't manage anything strong.

It's useless, I'll just-

A powerful flamethrower attack seemed to come out of nowhere, blasting the ursaring in the face and catching a number of other pokémon in the blaze. Cody tumbled to the ground and, without even thinking about it, fired off another thunderbolt at the nearest enemy to him.

This is what war does, huh? Just a machine of action and reaction. Not even a chance to recover before I find myself fighting again… I don't like it. But who fired the flamethrower?

In another moment, some of the troops were scattering and others were turning their attention away from Cody in order to address the team of pokémon who were coming. Arcanine, Luxray, Houndoom, Galvantula, and Max riding atop the luxray's back, firing off dragonbreath attacks that matched the fire-types' flamethrowers in intensity.

Four evolved pokémon and an archen who could quite nearly match them in terms of attack power - combined with the surprise of their attack, the pokémon who had very nearly beaten Cody now had to fall back, unable to stand up against them.

Max jumped off of the Luxray's back momentarily and, with a smile that seemed completely out of place in such a bloody battle, said, "Guildmaster Elgyem told us you could use some help. Now let's go get the rest of your team!"

"Don't have to tell me twice!" Cody said as he jumped onto Luxray's back with Max. In another minute, Team Courage - or so Cody had heard these five were called now - had broken through the nearby battle, where Ryan and Lisa still fought on, though they were even worse off than Cody was.

Cody's heart dropped into his stomach, though, as he saw Isola lying there in the midst of the battle, crumpled on the ground, Ryan and Lisa trying to defend her fallen body.

She's not… Please, no. In any other battle, I'd just say she's knocked out, but some of those wounds on her body look deep… She's bleeding a lot…

As the arcanine, houndoom, and luxray used their sheer bulk to fight off the enemies, Cody just watched Isola's body. And once the enemies were gone, Cody jumped off and ran over to her and, desperately, nudged her body with his nose.

"Isola? Isola! Are you okay?"

Much to his relief, she shifted a bit, but she didn't wake up.

"She just took a heavy hit," Ryan said. "She'll be fine, but we need to get out of here."

"And that's what we're here for!" Arcanine said with a happy bark. "Get on!"

Though Lisa seemed less than happy about running from a fight, even she didn't voice her complains as the four of them hopped onto the various, larger evolved pokémon.

As they dashed back out of the press of enemies - not without trouble, though few could stand against such a powerful team of evolved pokémon for long - Cody commented to Max, "We can't win. We've been at it all day, and… Look at how many pokémon are down. I didn't talk to a lot of Eastern Guild pokémon, but… Just look, they're dead. All around us."

The victorious smile faded from Max's face. "It's almost night. Even the enemy will want to rest. We'll at least get a break. And maybe, by morning, my guild and the Western Guild will make it."

Cody shook his head.

"Aw, come on, brighten up!" Max said, though he didn't sound too enthusiastic himself. "We've got to keep going. Especially us humans, or else all this… It'll never end. Kyurem'll win."

Cody shook his head again. "Even if the other guilds come, even if we win here… Everyone that's dead will still be dead."

"Come on, Cecil, hurry up!" Alexa said as she flew above him, the two of them leading the army with Cobalion, Terrakion, Deputy Zebstrika, and the Guildmasters. No doubt this was just so those strong pokémon could keep an eye on Cecil, who was far from trusted, but he didn't particular seem to mind their mistrust.

"I am hurrying!" Cecil said.

In reality he was keeping up perfectly fine, and Alexa knew that. *But… It's dawn already! Battle's already started again, and I'm scared of it, but I hate waiting for it like this! I want to be there now, let it be over with!*

"Alexa, don't you think you should rest your wings?" Cecil asked as he jogged along, at the same ground-eating pace that the whole army of Western Guild and Southern Guild had been moving at for the past day and a half. "You've only just been healed."

"I'm fine, worry wart!" *I'm not, not really… It's still so stiff, and it hurts a lot. But so long as I can ignore the pain and limit myself to basic flying, it's holding up well enough. I'm not going to be grounded from this battle. I'm not leaving Cecil alone to fight.*

… *And no matter the pain, it still feels wonderful to be in the sky again.*

"There's the battle!" Braviary suddenly called out, his booming voice reaching those even in the rearmost ranks. He and Mandibuzz had been flying low to stay out of sight, but now that their goal wasn't far, the two flew up high and sped up. "Charge, Southern Guild!"

"And you too, Western Guild!" Emolga shouted out from the top of Zebstrika's head, in one of her rare, serious moods.

Before speeding up, Cecil cast a glance up to Alexa. "Stay close, all right?" he said. "And if you can… Just stay in the air, avoid fighting. We should have superior aerial numbers, so you shouldn't have to get too involved. And if you really have to fight, wait for opportune chances. Don't push yourself."

Heart pounding, she replied, "Right, right, I've got it! Now let's go!"

The whole army's momentum increased as all their exhaustion from the past day and a half of almost straight marching faded, replaced

by a potent cocktail of other emotions. Alexa was no expert on judging other pokémon, but right now, everyone's faces were like open books as she slowed up a bit, watching the charging pokémon.

The Guildmasters all seem… Well, almost excited. Not in a callous way, but just like they're ready for this. Same for Cobalion and Virizion. Zebstrika… He looks conflicted. Like he knows how dangerous this'll get. And the others here, I mean… There's everything. Fear and exhilaration and righteousness and protectiveness and more fear. For some reason, I thought the guild pokémon would be like an army, ready for anything, not afraid of battle. But I think I *probably know more about fighting than them, at least fighting of this scale.*

… This is the first, isn't it? The first real war any of them have ever heard of.

Alexa's musings were interrupted as the army made first contact, hitting Kyurem's forces on their western flank. And before long, the battle itself was in full swing.

As much as she wanted to be in the thick of things, she could also feel her wings trembling, and not just out of pain. She simply flew for a while, getting the lay of the battle as it was this early in the morning.

I'm just stalling, she thought as she flew over rank upon rank of pokémon, both friend and foe alike. Not many bodies lay on the ground yet; it appeared as if they had arrived just in time to prevent the much-reduced forces under Elgyem, Terrakion, and Keldeo's command from being obliterated.

And that's exactly what would have happened… Look how few of them are left, she thought, her eyes wide.

She shook her head and wheeled about. *Cecil's going to be worried. He told me not to stray too far from him.* She clenched her talons. *I* will *go help. This whole battle, it's insane, it's terrifying, but I'll help.*

It didn't take her long to make it back to the section of the fight where Cecil was battling. Though the red, almost bandana-like cloth that hung from her neck and the neck of every other guild pokémon made her a target, it also meant that any allies would immediately come to her aid. And in the sky, that almost made her immune to any danger, because Cecil had been right: the bird pokémon of the warmer regions vastly outnumbered the flying pokémon who lived here, in this freezing climate.

As she made it to Cecil, she saw that the tides of battle were quickly turning. Kyurem's forces hadn't been prepared for reinforcements, nonetheless reinforcements that more than doubled the first attack's original numbers.

And all these flying pokémon… They can't handle being attacked from both above and in front. It's too much to pay attention to. We're driving them back! And I can help with that, too!

Cecil was facing off two pokémon right now, both of whose concentration was solely on the dangerous scyther in front of them.

Of course, Cecil doesn't look like he's having much trouble dealing with them… But I might as well pop down and help out! She dove, swooping just over one of the opponents' head and slashed out at him with her talons, cutting into his head and surprising him long enough for Cecil to deal the final - and, perhaps, killing - blow.

After that, Alexa soon lost track of the whole of the battle as she focused more on her own fighting, weaving in and out of the sky as she fought on. Unsurprisingly, she couldn't do much. She had never really battled before now, and so she was exceptionally weak. But she could distract enemy pokémon long enough for other guild pokémon to gain the upper hand. Soon, she didn't even have to worry about enemy aerial pokémon; Braviary, Mandibuzz, and other flying pokémon had soon taken care of quite literally all of them.

We're winning, Alexa thought as she circled for a bit, catching her breath and giving her trembling, injured wing a chance rest from the

more intense work it had been doing. *We've practically pushed them back to the guild. At this rate, it'll all be over soon!*

But Alexa's optimism was cut short as she caught sight of three pokémon emerging from the Northern Guild's main entrance, towering well over practically all other combatants on the field.

This… This can't be good.

A hydreigon, a haxorus, and a dragonite. Even under the best of circumstances, these were three pokémon that no one ever wanted to battle, assuming their strength matched the expectations of the species. But it wasn't just who they were that made the blood freeze in Alexa's veins and her little heart flutter madly.

They're… It's like they're made of ice. Their scales, their eyes, their claws… And that can only mean one thing. Kyurem's got a hold on them. And if they're powered up as much as I heard Emma is under Kyurem's control…

She didn't have to wait long to find out. The hydreigon immediately leapt into the sky, it's three mouths roaring and biting and seeking out anything within reach. She saw a staravia ripped apart before anyone could possibly react, its body bloody and crushed in the main head's jaws, while the hand-mouths held the poor bird's limp wings.

The dragonite and haxorus stayed on the ground and rushed forward, knocking even their own allies out of the way. And when they reached the front lines of guild pokémon, the fury they unleashed upon the pokémon there was too much for Alexa to watch for long.

This… This is terrible. It's like the difference between the guildmasters and Kyurem's troops, except this is worse. Those things are monsters.

It didn't take long for the Four Warriors, the Guildmasters, and the Deputies to converge on the three dragons, Emolga, Braviary, and

Mandibuzz going after Hydreigon in the sky while the others battled the two below.

I am not *getting involved in that,* Alexa thought as she quickly winged it back to Cecil's side.

"What's going on?" Cecil asked as she landed on his shoulder for a second, glad for the rest; not many pokémon on either side were still fighting now, Cecil included. Most had backed off from each other, instead turning to look up at the cataclysm between three guildmasters and one hydreigon above. Either that, or the pokémon on the ground were running back, getting as far away from the battles with the dragonite and haxorus as they possibly could.

"They're under Kyurem's control, and they're extremely strong," Alexa said, though that much was fairly obvious to anyone. "They just came out of the guild and started attacking."

Cecil started walking forward, towards the nearest battle, the one with the haxorus.

"Cecil, what in the world are you doing?" Alexa said. "They'll kill us! Just leave it to the Guildmasters and everyone else. I don't want to go anywhere near them!"

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to."

Both Cecil spun around to face the new voice so quickly that Alexa was nearly thrown from his shoulder. She did manage to hold on, though, and the two of them found themselves facing an elgyem. Though neither had met the pokémon before, they didn't have any doubt that this was Guildmaster Elgyem.

"Those pokémon are strong," Elgyem said. "If we Guildmasters, Deputies, and Warriors do manage to defeat them, it'll only be at the cost of us being completely exhausted. We can't risk that. These pokémon appear to be under Kyurem's control, much like Thundrus, Tornadus, and Landorus were at one point. In theory, that means

humans might be able to break the hold on them. Cody is out of action at the moment, but Max and his team are already helping with the haxorus. Our best chance is for you two to help out with the others."

"I'll go, but I can't let Alexa go," Cecil said.

Alexa's whole body was shivering now, from exhaustion or fear she couldn't quite tell. "For once, I agree with Mr. Overprotective here," she half-joked. "I can't even fly my best right now. One hit from those things might kill me."

"The other Guildmasters will protect you," Elgyem said, "and if it's absolutely not working, they'll make sure you get away. But we really don't have much of a choice. We need you to try."

Alexa looked up as Braviary just barely dodged a hyper beam attack. The hyper beam continued onwards to the ground, and she heard screams in the distance as some of Kyurem's forces were sent flying, hit either by the beam itself or knocked away by the ensuing explosion.

She gulped. *If I stay here, that hyper beam's just as likely to keep on hitting more pokémon. Might even hit me. Maybe I'd even be safer up there, with Braviary and Mandibuzz and Emolga all looking after me.*

Alexa didn't really believe that, of course, but she nonetheless turned back to Elgyem and said, "All right, I don't know how you expect me to do it, but I'll try."

"But Alexa, that's-"

Alexa flapped her wings and took off before she could hear Cecil's objections, mainly because she was afraid he'd convince her otherwise. Before she was completely out of earshot, though, she shouted back down, "If I manage to stop this hydreigon before you get that haxorus, I'm never going to let you live it down!"

After that, she didn't look back, instead focusing only on the fact that she was flying closer and closer to some monstrous, multi-headed ice dragon that even three guildmasters couldn't completely subdue. She almost turned tail and fled, and her bad wing almost gave out on her as she climbed higher and higher.

But I want to do this, she said, flapping her wings ever harder. *I can't let Cecil and everyone else protect me all the time. I don't want things to be like that. I'll do this myself.*

"Okay, wings, don't fail me now, because I'm going to need to fly like my usual self!"

Rather than go straight at the hydreigon, she flew above, blending in with the flurry of the number of other brave bird pokémon fighting alongside the three flying guildmasters. She circled there for a moment, catching sight of Emolga at one point; the tiny guildmaster smiled at her briefly before continuing the fight, turning herself into a living ball of electricity and flinging herself at one of the three heads.

I've been doing this all battle. Just wait for the right moment, and… Gotcha!

The main head had snapped at Emolga and missed; now was Alexa's chance. She closed her wings almost completely and dove, not even slowing herself down before hitting the main head right between the eyes, beak-first. The impact jarred her, and at first she found herself tumbling, unable to immediately catch herself midair. As she opened her wings and tried to stop her spinning, she saw jaws opening, roaring at her as they almost reached her-

And then massive talons closed around her, jerking her out of harm's way. As soon as the shock of the sudden change passed, she peeked out and saw Guildmaster Mandibuzz looking down at her. "That was a close call, dearie! But we're not out of hot water yet… He's after us, so hold on tight!"

There wasn't much holding that Alexa could do; Mandibuzz's grip was gentle, but firm enough to keep her from falling. Alexa shifted herself in the giant bird's talons just enough to see the hydreigon chasing after them, catching up with the much smaller mandibuzz.

Emolga launched a massive thunderbolt attack that blinded Alexa for a second, but it didn't stop the hydreigon. The dragon fell for a few seconds, stunned and roaring in pain, but then continued onward as fast as it could, gaining on them yet again.

"Looks like he's after you specifically, Alexa!" Mandibuzz said. Then, she shouted backwards, "Emolga, and Gale dear, you'll have to better than that!"

"On it!" Guildmaster Braviary called out as he appeared from seemingly out of nowhere, his aerial ace attack hitting hydreigon in exactly the same place as Alexa's high-speed peck attack, icy scales cracking on impact as the hydreigon once again began to tumble downwards, this time for longer than before.

"Well, if you can't bring that beast to his senses, at the very least you're doing wonders as a distraction, dearie!" Mandibuzz said to Alexa.

Alexa didn't almost didn't hear her, not just because of the wind rushing past her ears. She was still thinking about Braviary's attack.

Aerial ace… I can do that. Even with my wing the way it is… It'll hurt, but I can do it. And that spot on its head looks weak now. Of course, I can't do even a fraction of the damage that Braviary can do. But if there really is something to being human, something that I can do that they can't… Well, then I don't want to just be carried around by Mandibuzz as bait while Emolga and Braviary attack. After being useless for the past week, after being grounded, I don't want to rely on someone else to do my flying for me.

"Mandibuzz, did my attack do anything? Anything at all?" Alexa shouted as she watched the hydreigon catch himself and once again

begin to catch up with Mandibuzz and herself.

"Why, yes, just for a second, actually!" Mandibuzz replied. "He just stopped! Stopped flying, stopped fighting, everything. He dropped a bit in the sky before he came to his senses again and nearly got a hold of you!"

Then that means that maybe, just maybe, I can do it. I can stop him. I'm not sure if it's the right way, but… But I was there when Max almost got through the Thundrus the first time, and I heard about the Solstice games. All three of the humans then were very nearly caught, and then they turned things around. Maybe, if I'm that desperate, my attack will get through to it… And if not, the Guildmasters will save me. I hope.

"I'm going to try something. Wish me luck!"

And before Mandibuzz could protest - since, like with Cecil, Alexa was afraid any argument would make her lose her nerve - Alexa squirmed out of the talons, fell for a second, then caught herself and began flying. Not away from the hydreigon, but straight at the monster, right towards its empty, ice eyes.

There was a squawk of surprise from somewhere behind her, but Alexa paid Mandibuzz no mind. She had only seconds before hydreigon would reach her. She had to make those seconds count.

I might not like to fight, she thought as it came closer, and closer, and still she just kept on flying towards it, *but I am going to fight my own battles, even against something like this!*

She kept flying resolutely forward, right towards the three open mouths, all of them reaching for her, ready to capture her or tear her apart or just swallow her in one bite, as they no doubt could've. But then, right at that last second, she flapped her wings as hard as she could and altered her flight just a bit, though even that little bit was difficult to manage. Because, at the cost of the pain searing through

her injured wing, with that one mighty flap she pulled off the speed necessary for an aerial ace attack.

She zoomed quite literally between the fangs of the hydreigon's main head, but came out the side of its mouth just before it could close on her. With another flap of her wings and the tightest turn she could manage, she veered upside down in a loop barely taller than herself. And, at the end of the loop, she found herself crashing into the cracked scales on the top of its head, at a much faster pace than even her earlier dive.

The impact this time was enough to send stars dancing in front of her eyes as she fell, and fell, before being caught again by someone - who it was, she couldn't quite tell. Her beak hurt, it felt quite possibly like it might have cracked, or been driven into her skull from the impact.

"Are you all right?" she heard a male voice, Braviary's voice, call down to her.

She took a few seconds to blink away the mix of dark and light spots in her vision. "Yeah," she said, not very convincingly. "Did I… Did I do anything?"

The world around her was suspiciously devoid of the sound of a giant dragon falling to the ground. *I knew it. I was stupid. And unless Braviary can get me to safety, I'll just be caught or killed, and-*

"Do anything? You did everything!" Braviary practically crowed with excitement. "Take a look!"

In another moment, Alexa felt their downward flight slow, and she was deposited gently onto the ground. She got to her feet quickly, not wanting to look weak, but she almost immediately fell back over, her vision going almost completely black and her stomach turning horribly.

"Tsk tsk tsk," Mandibuzz's voice said as she felt the motherly pokémon's wing pushing her more slowly back to her feet. "More a brave bird attack than anything - you took quite the backlash, I'd say. But you did it."

Alexa's vision stopped swimming for long enough for her to see what was happening. In the distance, many of Kyurem's troops were fleeing back into the guild; all signs of battle had stopped, including any battles with that haxorus and dragonite.

And just in front of her, Alexa saw a deino lying in the snow, dead. She wouldn't have even made the connection between this puny, very regular-looking corpse and the icy monster that, until moments ago, had been flying around and murdering pokémon, if not for one little detail.

The hair that normally covered its eyes and forehead was swept away, revealing a small indent right between the eyes.

"You mean, this is *it* ? Did I… I killed it?"

"Nope nope," Emolga said as she walked up, joining them. "It's been dead dead a while now, I think."

Alexa looked up to Mandibuzz for explanation.

"Even if it had been a deino when you hit it, you're not particularly strong - even such a precise hit wouldn't have killed it, sweetie," Mandibuzz said. "But… perhaps this pokémon, and the haxorus and dragonite, weren't like the weather gods, or like Cody. If they gave up themselves willingly to Kyurem, then - it's just theory of course, but looking at this - maybe they died then, and Kyurem's just been manipulating the bodies, sustaining them by his own power. No doubt he would've found dragons to be suitable vessels to use for as long as he keeps hiding himself."

So… I did it! I managed to stop that thing! I pretty much nearly killed myself in the process, but still! Her feathers fluffed up instinctually

with pride.

"Alexa, are you all right?"

Alexa turned to see Cecil running up, seemingly exhausted but not particularly damaged from his own fight with the haxorus.

"I'm fine, I'm fi-"

The sound of movement suddenly echoed out from the Northern Guild as pokémon once more flooded out, ready to continue the battle even though their dragons had been defeated. They didn't attack immediately, though; once outside, they formed into their ranks, then just waited.

"Form back up!" Braviary shouted to the guild army, most of whom needed no prodding. "We've still got battle to do!"

"But at least those monsters are gone now," Alexa said as she looked over to Cecil. "We have the guildmasters and the Four Warriors, against all their regular old pokémon."

Cecil didn't show any sign of agreement. Instead, he continued to stare at the Northern Guild entrance. "Something else is coming."

Alexa followed his gaze in time to see a shadow walking out from the darkness of the guild. And as the afternoon sun finally fell upon him, she felt her earlier relief drain.

"It's Abomasnow," Emolga said sadly. "Snowy snowy… What's happened to you?"

Her confusion was completely justified, because Alexa knew this wasn't what an abomasnow was supposed to be. All of its body - not just part, but all - was covered in ice, but not just like how the dragons had been. This was different. It was almost like the ice had acquired a life of its own, covering his body like some rough parasite.

Spikes of ice jutted from his body, his arms, his back, making him all the more intimidating.

"Looks like we're not out of the woods yet," Cecil said.

Abomasnow suddenly began to run forward, and his army followed him.

Alexa spread her wings and gave them an experimental flap. Her wing hurt more than ever; she wasn't going to do any more fancy moves. But she could still fly, which meant she could still fight, if only a bit.

Cecil and Max and I… It looks like we all managed to break Kyurem's hold on those dragons. So long as there's a chance, we've got to try and wake Abomasnow up… Or if he's like those dragons, then we have to get Kyurem out of him, and let him die.

"You can go back now, if you want," Cecil said to Alexa. "Max and I are less damaged. We can get this."

That's true… But I have a bad feeling about this. Abomasnow even looks different than the dragons did. I don't think he'll go down quite as easily.

Alexa shook her head. "I won't do much, but I'll be there, I'll help."

For once, instead of protesting, Cecil simply nodded. "Just be careful."

Alexa flapped up into the air and circled once around his head. "Same to you, Cecil."

Probably could've had this done yesterday, but I have Netflix and fast Internet now. And do you know what that means? DOCTOR WHO. LOTS AND LOTS OF DOCTOR WHO, which I'm currently catching up on.

Plus, after the first two weeks, my brain had turned to mush. I needed lots of recuperation time. It just happened to take the form of Doctor Who.

Anyway, chapters are still going to be sporadic, as you no doubt can already tell. I'll keep it up as best I can, though!

Chapter 33: Siege of the North Part 2

Chapter Thirty-Three: Siege of the North Part II

This is not good! Max thought as he leapt aside, just barely dodging Abomasnow's ice beam attack. In the moments that followed, the other pokémon took advantage of Abomasnow's focus on Max and attacked. Cecil whirled in with a slash attack, which just barely chipped off one of the icy, unnatural spikes that jutted from Abomasnow's body; Emolga loosed a thunderbolt; even Cody, who had rejoined the battle to help face this newest threat, managed to sneak in with a headbutt attack.

But Cody couldn't get away in time, and Max winced as he watched Abomasnow's arm swing down, slamming the zigzagoon away in a powerful wood hammer attack, made all the more painful by the hard, rough ice that covered the arm.

Abomasnow is destroying us! Max said as he simply watched the next wave of attacks: a coordinated strike consisting of Deputy Zebstrika's flame charge and the flamethrowers of Deputy Zoroark, Aiden, and Kuro. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this did more than anything up until now in the battle; Abomasnow was sent stumbling backwards, steam hissing and a huge crater melted into the icy armor on his stomach.

Abomasnow quickly regained his footing, opened his mouth, and blew out a gust of freezing wind filled with snow and ice, which hit everyone who was anywhere in front of him. Max couldn't get out of the way in time, and instead did his best to huddle down, enduring the cold that passed straight through his feathers and right to his very core.

The blizzard stopped soon enough as pokémon not caught in the blast - Cecil, as well as some more of the deputies and guildmasters - attacked, drawing Abomasnow's attention back towards them.

This is crazy, Max thought as he shook the accumulated snow and ice from his body, though still he stayed where he was, neither retreating nor attacking. *Can we even win against this thing? He acts like he's taken no damage at all… Maybe he hasn't. The only attack that's even begun to penetrate all that ice were all those fire attacks combined, and it looks like even that didn't get completely through.*

"Aim where the ice has been weakened!" Guildmaster Mandibuzz shouted as she circled overhead, waiting for the right moment to rejoin the fray. "That's our best bet!"

"Come on, Max," Zeke said, suddenly at Max's side; like Max, he'd been caught in the blizzard attack, and his fur still seemed frosted. "You and the other humans have to keep attacking. Otherwise, even with all the guildmasters and deputies fighting, it looks like we might lose.

Max got a hold of his fear as best he could and pushed it back. *I'm done with running, so there's nothing left to do but fight.* "All right, then, I'll give it another go!"

He sprinted forward, nearly tripping a couple times as blood tried and nearly failed to flow through his half-frozen legs. But soon he was picked up speed, running headlong towards Abomasnow and letting determination fill him, hoping that Abomasnow wouldn't turn until-

Now!

He didn't have another choice except to fire off the dragonbreath he'd been preparing earlier than he'd wanted; Abomasnow had seen him coming from the side, and he was turning to face him. Though Max wasn't nearly close enough to have a good shot at the weak spot on Abomasnow's body, he still managed to loose the dragonbreath while quickly pivoting about and running away. His charge didn't come without a cost - before he could get out of range, Abomasnow's ice beam attack hit him in a wing, miraculously leaving it unfrozen but still filling it with pain.

Abomasnow rushed after him, but was soon distracted as the Four Warriors jumped into the fray, using their horns to slash at Abomasnow from all sides. They were soon forced to retreat by another wood hammer attack, though they didn't escape before the grass-type attack had done plenty of damage to Keldeo and Terrakion.

Another wave of attackers followed immediately after - Braviary, Mandibuzz, and Emolga all flying down from above, all shouting out loudly.

What are they doing, making all that noise! It's as if they want to be stopped! Max thought as he saw Abomasnow swing his head upward, take a deep breath, and then exhale another giant gust of freezing wind and snow before the flying pokémon could even get close. All three were sent tumbling upwards into the air for a moment before falling back down and crashing to the ground not far away from Abomasnow; all three were heavily damaged, and from what Max could tell, Guildmaster Braviary was almost completely frozen, barely able to move despite his best efforts.

But the distraction did its trick. Before Abomasnow could turn his attention back to defending himself from ground enemies, practically everyone saw the opening and attacked. Keldeo, Virizion, Cobalion, and Terrakion attacked at once, with their horns; more fire from Zebstrika, Zoroark, Aiden, and Kuro further deepened the hole in Abomasnow's icy armor; others contributed with their own attacks, splitting Abomasnow's attention.

Abomasnow roared in apparent pain for the first time in the course of the battle, lashing out with an ice-punch at the pokémon who had dared come in close to use physical attacks. Cecil got the brunt of the attack, and he skidded into a drift some distance away before lying there, completely still, half buried in the snow.

"Cecil!" Alexa shouted as Max watched her fly down to his side, ignoring the fact that Abomasnow was now advancing on the fallen scyther.

We're doomed, Max thought as he nonetheless rushed forward again, joining others in an attempt to draw Abomasnow's attention away from Cecil and Alexa. He stopped short and launched his ancientpower attack, which landed at the same time as Cody's thunderbolt, a psychic blast from Elgyem, and another flame charge from Zebstrika. As accurate and determined as ever, Zebstrika managed to hit Abomasnow right at the previously made weak point in the ice, melting it further.

But like before, attacking at close-range came at a cost. Abomasnow swung out with another wood hammer attack, knocking Zebstrika out cold.

Max felt his heart tighten in his chest. *About half of the guildmasters and deputies are down, Virizion and Terrakion aren't doing well against the ice attacks, Cecil's down, the rest of us are injured and tired, and Abomasnow's barely flinched. And… no, Kara, Zeke, no!*

Zeke, with Kara perched precariously on his head, was running straight towards Abomasnow; there could be no doubt that Abomasnow could see them coming as drew back his arm, preparing to meet them head-on with an ice punch. There was no doubt that such a direct attack would do a lot of damage, and the damage they could possibly hope to do in return was not near enough to merit the cost.

Without thinking, Max rushed forward, hoping he could make it in time to stop them, or at least aid them. But they were already too far ahead. Max unconsciously slowed to a stop and watched as, just before they came within Abomasnow's reach, Kara shot off an electroweb attack, its power compounded by Zeke's own electricity.

The electroweb covered Abomasnow's entire body and sizzled against the ice, but it wasn't enough to stop the already thrown ice punch, which hit Zeke fully in the chest, knocking him out and hurling both him and Kara back.

But… It wasn't in vain! Max though as he rushed forward, the tiniest bit of hope surging through him. *Abomasnow managed the punch because he'd already started it, but now he's having trouble moving, between the web and the electricity! Now's our chance!*

Max wasn't the only one to notice the temporary immobility as all those still able to battle hurried to take advantage of Zeke and Kara's charge. Elgyem teleported in and psybeamed the back of Abomasnow's head at point-blank range, while the fastest and closest of those on the ground, Aiden and Kuro, attacked with fire fang, biting down hard on either of Abomasnow's arms and refusing to let go.

Not fire! Not now! It'll burn through the web! Max thought as he quickly let off another ancientpower attack and quickly ran away; seeing how badly this battle was going, he wasn't feeling nearly confident enough to try a dragonbreath. He looked back over his shoulder and saw his worries confirmed - the fire fangs had effectively burned through parts of the webbing, allowing Abomasnow some mobility once again. He threw the two fire-types off, and this time, they weren't able to get up right away again - both had taken quite a lot of damage already.

The Guildmasters, my team, everyone… They're being defeated one by one.

Cody saw the weakening web and the defeat of Kuro and Aiden too late; the zigzagoon couldn't stop himself in time to avoid the ice beam that encased one of his front legs in a visible layer of ice and brought him to a complete stop. Exhausted as he was from nearly two days of fighting now, he couldn't maintain consciousness anymore as he collapsed to the ground.

We're doomed, but I can't run anymore. I won't run, even if I'm dooming myself.

Before anyone could do anything, Abomasnow closed the distance between himself and his most recent target, picking up the

unconscious zigzagoon and slinging him under his arm. Abomasnow turned and began to head towards Cecil and Alexa, the latter of whom - though mostly uninjured - began to panic, though she still refused to leave Cecil's side.

I've gotta try.

Max ran forward for what he feared would be the final time, letting his determination fill him and coat his talons as he ran, his dragonfire-coated feet melting the snow beneath him with each step.

If I can just flap my wings and jump, get enough air to reach his stomach and really tear into the gap in his armor with a dragon claw…

Max came to a stop halfway between Alexa and the approaching Abomasnow, making absolutely no attempt to be discreet about what he was doing. Abomasnow shifted his attention and dropped Cody to the ground, apparently to allow himself full movement in the fight that seemed imminent. He locked eyes with Max and sped his approach, once again winding back his arm for an ice punch.

Suddenly, the purplish energy around Max's talons disappeared as he stood there, paralyzed, unable to look away from Abomasnow's empty gaze.

I have to do it, he said as he tried to make himself move, fight, even run - to do *something* rather than stand there, just waiting to be finished off.

But he's just too… too… There's no way I can fight him. There's no way I can fight Guildmaster Abomasnow, even if I can work up the courage again. Abomasnow is-

No, not Abomasnow. That thing is not an abomasnow. It's a monster. No heart, no soul, just a pokémon possessed by the ice that encases it. I have to go. I have to fight, or I have to run, I don't care, I just need to do something!

But he was completely paralyzed by fear as Abomasnow's shadow fell over him, and up until the last moment he could do nothing to avoid the fist of ice that slammed into him like a wall of force, sending him sliding, tumbling across the snow as his vision faded in and out.

He eventually rolled to a stop and opened his eyes to find himself looking back the way he'd come. Blackness was closing in fast at the edge of his vision, but he could see Abomasnow steadily advancing, ignoring the attacks from the few others who were still conscious enough to battle. He could feel the rumble of the ground as the demon's steps drew nearer - or maybe that was the pounding of his heart sounding through his body, he couldn't tell. His vision darkened further, and for a moment, he almost thought he was drifting into complete unconsciousness, and he fought against it. Soon enough, though, he realized that the darkening was something else, something very different: a giant shadow over everything he could see that was slowly growing darker, as if some cloud was descending from above, its shadow becoming steadily more concentrated the lower it came.

I… I don't understand, Max thought as he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. With some difficulty, he managed to tear his eyes away from the nearing threat of Abomasnow and instead looked up.

And right as his mind managed to comprehend the white pokémon that completely filled his vision, three voices - Reshiram's deep, booming roar, accompanied by the higher cadences of Vulpix and Bulbasaur on his back - shouted a battle cry that shook the entire battlefield.

Frozen in place - this time by awe rather than fear - Max watched as the still diving Reshiram opened his maw wider and let loose a waterfall of flames that cascaded straight onto Abomasnow. Max felt heat rolling off from the attack, though he couldn't watch to see what was happening; the fires were too bright for him to so much as look in that direction, nonetheless actually see anything through the torrent of flames. He shielded his face as best he could and looked

away until a massive downdraft from Reshiram's wings drove him practically into the ground as the elegant dragon pulled out of his dive, ceasing the attack and zooming right overhead.

When Max looked forward again he saw that, though Reshiram had not yet landed, there was now someone standing between him and Abomasnow. Or, rather, two someones. Though both looked shaken by their jump to the ground from Reshiram's back, they nonetheless stood their ground boldly as they faced down Abomasnow who, though now lacking the spikes of ice armor that had so thoroughly encased and defended him before, seemed more enraged than ever as he charged towards the two tiny pokémon of Team Rebirth.

"Vulpix, now!" Reshiram shouted as he turned as tightly as he could, though he still couldn't possibly make it back in time to defend her from the oncoming threat. "His defenses are down - rid him of the last of Kyurem's influence!"

Reshiram… he got rid of all that ice in a single attack, Max thought, slowly, almost calmly, awestruck as he still was. *And Vulpix… Can she really…?*

Neither Bulbasaur nor Vulpix faltered as they stood their ground, waiting as Abomasnow came close and closer, so enraged that he seemed more likely to trample them than to use any actual attacks. Max thought he saw Vulpix mutter something, and Bulbasaur shake his head ever so slightly. Then they continued to wait, until Abomasnow towered over them, until it was nearly too late.

And then, right at that last moment, Vulpix took a breath and fired off an overheat attack, the bright beam of fire hitting Abomasnow right in the stomach.

Abomasnow at once seemed to go stiff, though his momentum carried him onward, sending him tumbling forward. Bulbasaur managed to jump out of the way, but Vulpix seemed almost incapacitated from the force of her own attack. Abomasnow half fell

on top of her, and the both of them skidded some ways before coming to a stop, right next to one another.

"Did… Did she do it?" Max whispered breathlessly as he managed to get to his feet. He walked over in a sort of shocked daze, reaching them just as Bulbasaur was helping Vulpix to her feet.

"You're sure you're okay?" Bulbasaur was asking.

Vulpix nodded, then turned and, cautiously, poked Abomasnow in the arm with one of her paws. "Abomasnow? Guildmaster Abomasnow, are you back to your old self?"

Abomasnow shifted and groaned, but didn't respond.

Before Vulpix could attempt to rouse him again, Max felt another gust of wind from above, and the ground shook as Reshiram landed just behind them. Max, still all but speechless as he stood uselessly near Team Rebirth, turned with them to look at the living legend, the pokémon said to embody half of the Spirit of the land itself.

Leaning his head down and giving Abomasnow an appraising look, Reshiram said, "This Abomasnow will be fine now, I can see that well enough." Then, he raised his head and looked out over all the pokémon present. There were the guildmasters and deputies, all either unconscious or severely wounded; there were the guild pokémon, who throughout the course of the fight with Abomasnow had hung back, unable to do anything against the monstrocity; and then there were the few pokémon who remained of the false Northern Guild's army, the dozens who had been too caught up in both the destructive powers of Abomasnow and the incredible arrival of Reshiram to either flee from the fight or retreat back into the guild.

Reshiram looked from one group to the next. Then, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, he said, "This battle is over." And turning to Kyurem's forces, he added, "Anyone who wishes to continue the fight may take up the matter with me."

"The entirety of the guild has been secured," Elgyem said when he teleported back into the main gathering space of the Northern Guild where Reshiram, the guildmasters, the deputies, the Four Warriors, the humans and their teams all sat; it was the only place in the Northern Guild large enough to accommodate Reshiram, who filled nearly a fourth of the cavernous icy room. "And the guards are stationed at any entrances to here, so we will have our privacy for now."

"So does that mean we can wake wake Snowy up, Reshy?" Emolga asked excitedly, as spirited as ever despite the fact that her wounds had only received the most basic of treatment as of yet.

Vulpix smiled; she hadn't quite realized until now how much she'd missed the guildmaster these past couple of weeks. *Even now, after everything that's happened, she's still cheerful. And when we finally got a chance to breathe after Abomasnow was taken down, she welcomed me back like I never did anything wrong.*

She caught Bulbasaur looking at her, grinning, and she guessed that he was thinking the same thing. Emolga could bring a smile to almost anyone's face, no matter the situation.

But as Vulpix turned back to see Emolga jumping on Abomasnow's stomach, her smile didn't remain for long. *Everyone's more focused on Guildmaster Abomasnow right now, but what happens when they turn their attention back to me? I have Reshiram's approval now, and they can't very well argue with him… But how many will trust me? I don't think I could even face most of my guild, after all they've been through thanks to me.*

Vulpix pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind as Emolga jumped to the ground and Abomasnow slowly sat up. "Emolga?" he asked, his voice soft but gruff. "And… Everyone? Braviary, Mandibuzz, Elgyem, it's good to see you all." He said this almost mechanically, as if he was still trying to figure out what was going on. "And… You couldn't be Reshiram, could you?"

"Indeed I am," Reshiram said simply.

Abomasnow looked around, confused, for a few more moments, before his face grew grave. He looked first to Zoroark, his deputy, and then to everyone else once more. "What did I do?" he asked solemnly.

"Then you are aware that you did something?" Reshiram asked.

"I suspect it, and you just confirmed it," Abomasnow said. Then, turning more desperately to his deputy, he asked once more, "Please, tell me what I did."

Zoroark smiled, her typical carefree demeanor showing through. "Calm down there, old guy. You've just been through a bit of a fight, don't want you to get all worked up now - and it wasn't your fault in the first place, I don't think anyone's gonna blame you once we hear the whole of it."

"Just tell your story from the beginning, Abomasnow," Reshiram said, his gaze stern but not judgmental. "Then we will fill in what you see unaware of. You clearly know that something was wrong with you, which is different enough from the others who were possessed by Kyurem who have since been awoken."

"Kyurem?" Abomasnow asked. "That's… Is that who did this to me?"

"Yes," Reshiram answered patiently. "Now tell us what happened."

Abomasnow shook his head. "I don't remember. Not entirely. Some time in the last few years, I realized I was forgetting things. At first, it wouldn't be long - just a conversation that I couldn't recall at all. Then… Whole days, simply gone. It must have caused quite some confusion for you, Zoroark."

The deputy nodded. "That was about three years ago, now. You handed over control of the day-to-day activities of the guild to me

after I caught you in your confusion on multiple occasions. You wouldn't tell me what was going on."

"That's because I didn't know, but I didn't want to worry you more," Abomasnow said. "I thought it would be something I could deal with myself. A little more rest, perhaps.

"Rest didn't help. Things got worse, and I couldn't understand what was happening to me. By the time I forced myself to acknowledge that something was seriously wrong… well, by then, it was too late. Whenever I tried to mention it, or even hint at it, it would trigger the blackness - apparently, I went about my actions as usual, but I couldn't remember any of it afterwards. I tried to leave the guild, but either the blackness would start again, or I'd find myself unable to move forward. As if my legs were growing heavier with each step."

Vulpix shivered a bit and looked down at her feet, just to be sure the icy manacles were still gone, as they had been even since Reshiram's awakening. *That sounds exactly like what happened to me,* she thought when she was satisfied that her paws were ice free. *But he isn't mentioning any ice. So how did it happen to him?*

"I had no idea what was happening, or why. My only clue were nightmares… But like the blackouts, I could never remember what happened in them when I awoke. Eventually, I blacked out again, and I woke up here… And I honestly have no idea how long has passed since then. I remember that I missed the Solstice Games - I blacked out before it, and for its entirety. I woke up aroune when pokémon were sent to search for you four," he looked to the Four Warriors, "and after that… I don't recall exactly when it was, but none of you had been found yet. And now I'm here."

"Silly silly Snowy!" Emolga said, with her usual cheerful insensitivity. "That was weeks ago!"

"Nearing a month ago, actually," Elgyem mused aloud.

Reshiram turned to look at Deputy Zoroark. "And you suspected nothing?"

"No way!" Zoroark said. "I mean, he'd been acting a bit odd, don't get me wrong. But he was also his usual grumpy, uncommunicative self - I think he's talked more now than I've heard him talk all together in the years I've been deputy. No offense, big guy."

Abomasnow looked like offense had indeed been taken, but he of all pokémon realized that now was not the time to focus on that. "Now tell me, what did I do while I was out?"

"It seems you organized and led an army on Kyurem's behalf," Keldeo said when no one else spoke up. "You sent more than half of the Northern Guild away in order to have the guild to yourself, and you indirectly helped Kyurem to awaken Zekrom."

Abomasnow's eyes opened wider as he looked around the room desperately, as if hoping someone would contradict Keldeo's statement. Then, seeing the truth of the situation, he hung his head and said, "I don't deserve to be a guildmaster anymore, if that's the case."

Vulpix felt someone's gaze on her, and she turned to see Reshiram looking at her intently. But he looked at her only for a moment before turning to Abomasnow again and saying, "You had no control of your actions, just as Thundurus, Landorus, and Tornadus were oblivious to their doings; you need not shoulder the blame. That aside, we are missing one important piece of information, and the blame might lie therein. When exactly is it that you met Kyurem, or how did it otherwise gain control over you?"

"I don't remember anything about how it started," Abomasnow said. "As far as I could tell, the memory lapses had no trigger. They simply began."

"Kyurem must have approached you at some time, though," Reshiram insisted. "Spiritually, if not physically. The Spirit is not a

thing so easily tamed that Kyurem could choose pokémon at will from among the land and take control of them. It must have had contact with you first."

Cody suddenly stepped forward, saying, "He would've felt really cold and dark. I don't remember much, but… he offered me a deal of some sort. I refused, and that's when he took over."

"Your nightmares were probably a lot like that first encounter," Vulpix added as well. She sat up straight and kept her eyes trained on Abomasnow for his reaction, purposefully ignoring the number of resentful gazes now trained on her.

Abomasnow thought for a moment, then said, "I thought it was a dream… I thought I just hit my head."

"You've remembered, then?" Reshiram prompted. "If so, tell us. We need any information we can get."

"I don't remember it well," Abomasnow began. "It must have started about five years ago, before the Winter Solstice Games. Before the games had begun, I found a cavern that had collapsed since the year before, so I was doing my best to clear out the debris and refreeze the passage so that it would be suitable for use again. Then… Beneath some of the ice debris, there was a hole, like a large tunnel going deeper."

Reshiram let out a sort of sigh and said, "Of course, that is where Kyurem would be. The same place he first fell to earth, and the same place that I hear Thundrus, Tornadus, and Landorus cornered him - in reality, he never left that crater." Reshiram pulled himself out of his train of thought and, looking back to Abomasnow, said, "Please, continue."

Abomasnow did as he was told. "There had never been any hole or tunnel there before, so I went in to see if perhaps some pokémon had taken up residence before I sealed off the hole. It went fairly

deep, but eventually I found myself in some larger ice cavern, beneath the bulk of the glacier…"

He shook his head. "After everything was said and done, I thought the cave was just a dream. After it all happened, I woke up partway down the hole, not far down from the original cavern - the bottom of the pit I sat on was just more ice. I thought I'd fallen, hit my head, and had an odd dream because of the circumstances. It certainly didn't seem like anything worth fussing over."

"And that dream was…?" Reshiram asked.

"Well, the big cavern at the very bottom of the tunnel - it was freezing, and dark, and something about it put me on edge. It was so cold that, before I could get farther into the cave, my body froze up. I couldn't move. And then… There was a voice, and I got the sense that there was something formidable in the darkness just ahead, and I just couldn't see it. It asked who I was. I answered, and demanded it let me go. It said… It told me I could go free if I gave up my Spirit. I obviously refused, though it continued to insist on it for some time. It threatened my guild, and I almost gave in; whatever it was, I believed it could truly destroy the entire guild with ease, like it said. But still… Giving up my Spirit seemed so unnatural. I couldn't possibly agree.

"Then it relented. It simply let me go, and after that, I don't remember anything until I woke up, and the tunnel seemed as if it was never there, except to a dozen feet down or so."

Reshiram's eyes narrowed. "It simply gave up? Surely it said something else before it let you go."

Abomasnow shook his head. "He only said that because I had resisted so well, he would grant me that boon - said that he would do me a kindness, and harm neither me nor my guild."

Reshiram nodded sagely. "That would be it. That's how he took control of you."

"What do you mean?" Cobalion asked.

"While the bodies of Zekrom and I slept these past ten years or so, our Spirits were still perfectly alert - we used the time to discover as much about Kyurem as we could. I will explain more in time, when all of you have had the chance to rest and recover, but for the moment, know this. At the time Abomasnow so unluckily stumbled upon Kyurem's resting place, Kyurem was conscious, but incapable of action. It couldn't force its control upon the guildmaster as it has since done with you," he looked to Cody, "and with the other human who remains under his command.

"So Kyurem resorted to its tricks. Had Abomasnow given his Spirit over, he would have died right then, and been completely taken over by Kyurem. But since Abomasnow refused, Kyurem turned to its last resort. He let Abomasnow go - something that it would have never normally done. It hungers too much; letting something go is not in its nature. Though there was no deal, such an act no doubt inspired some amount of gratitude in you, Abomasnow, some sense as if a favor had been done for you."

"I wouldn't phrase it that way," Abomasnow said. "I was grateful to be alive, not to him for letting me live."

"The gratitude, the idea that it had done a favor for you, wouldn't necessarily have been a conscious thought," Reshiram said. "It's a natural sentiment whenever someone does something they needn't have, to your benefit. Even in the worst of situations, it still often applies. I suspect Kyurem managed to worm some of its own Spirit into you, through that sentiment, even though you didn't make a deal. And from there, that fragment of Spirit grew until it could control you completely, for long periods of time. And because of how the Spirit was put in you, it only influenced you, I suspect; it seems as if you somehow kept a rough approximation of your voice and personality, even when you lost control of your actions. It was a form of possession quite unlike what happened to the three weather gods, just as that in turn was somewhat different from what has happened to some of the humans."

"But it is gone now, correct?" Abomasnow asked. "Kyurem can't take control of me any longer?"

Reshiram looked over to Vulpix. "Yes, indeed, thanks to that human there, as well as thanks to my own fire."

Cobalion suddenly took a step towards Reshiram and said, "Reshiram, forgive me for saying so, but I can't hold back any longer - you're being tricked. You must not trust that human; she has been under Kyurem's control before. She attacked pokémon of her own guild and stole the Light Stone in which you resided, and unless we get rid of her now, we'll only be walking into ruin."

"Cobalion speaks the truth," Virizion added, casting a glare in Vulpix's direction. "I vouch for what he says, and no pokémon in here could possibly deny that she is still under Kyurem's influence. That necklace of hers proves it. Can you not sense it?"

"And your both being completely unfair!" Max suddenly spoke up, much to everyone's surprise, including Vulpix's. "I don't know everything that's happened with her since she left the guild, but you did all you could to bring Reshiram to his senses, right?" Max asked.

Max, your support means a lot to me, but I don't want Cobalion and others hating you, too, just for sticking up for me, Vulpix thought. She answered, "Yes, but… I still see where Cobalion and Virizion are coming from."

A deep, rumbling growl echoed out of Reshiram's throat. "I do not appreciate the two of you questioning my judgment, Cobalion and Virizion. Nor do I appreciate *you* of all pokémon lending any sort of credibility to their bias, Vulpix." Reshiram said. Then, looking specifically to Cobalion and Virizion, he said, "I see much more clearly what she is than you two do, I can assure you of that; just because I bequeathed to you some of my powers in order to guard my stone does not give you two any authority to do my thinking for me, nor does it give you any abilities even close to equal to my own. I know what she is, and what she has done, and why it is Kyurem

has a hold on her. I won't deny that she is to blame for that, and she'd best not deny it either."

It wasn't something I was wanting to broadcast to everyone, but looks like I've got no choice. "I don't deny it," she said. "I made a deal with Kyurem with a human, that much is true. But I regret it. And I'm doing what I can to make up for it."

Reshiram let out a satisfied huff. "And that is why I trust her anyway. Only a human with the Spirit of a hero could have possibly awoken me, and with the threat of Kyurem looming ever nearer and Zekrom currently under its control, I have no choice but to rely on her."

Bulbasaur leaned over to Vulpix and muttered, "That's hardly a ringing endorsement of your character. 'I have no choice' my bulb, you stopped him from destroying everything in his path. You'd think he could praise you a bit more."

In spite of the situation, a smile tugged at the corners of Vulpix's mouth. *Count on Bulbasaur to criticize a god on my behalf.*

Turning back to the matter at hand, Vulpix saw that both Cobalion and Virizion seemed more subdued and, to her amusement, Emolga's smile was wider than ever and carried more than a hint of smugness.

"Would anyone else like to debate my choice of ally?" Reshiram challenged. "Or would you have preferred me to stay locked in the Light Stone forever over waking up for her?"

No one spoke up.

"Good. That is all that needs to be said for now. I suggest we reconvene later, when everyone present has had a chance to heal and rest. I'll tell everyone the whole of the story of Kyurem as I understand it then." Reshiram said as he got up and headed towards the exit. "For now, I am going outside to spread my wings for a bit. I won't be gone long."

"I should think not," Elgyem commented, taking everyone by surprise.

Reshiram seemed both unamused and perplexed by the offhand remark. "And why do you say that?"

"Well, just listen for a moment," Elgyem said.

Everyone was quiet as they listened, but all they could hear was the howl of wind outside. And Deputy Swadloon said as much. "It's just the wind, idiot. Sheesh."

"Not just wind - a blizzard," Elgyem said. "I teleported out for a bit when I heard the wind picking up. I assure you, the storm came in quite fast."

"Fast nothin', the sky was completely clear an hour ago," Swadloon said as she waddled past him, into the curved tunnel that led to the outside. "I won't believe it 'til I see it."

Everyone waited in silence for a minute until Swadloon reappeared, her leafy blankets tucked tighter than ever around her body, the blankets themselves now covered in snow.

"Idiot's right," Swadloon said in her usual, sarcastic monotone. "Don't know about gods like yourself, Reshiram, but the rest of us certainly aren't going out anytime soon."

Reshiram's eyes narrowed, though whether he was angry at the blizzard or Swadloon's demeanor was anyone's guess. "I see no reason in wasting my energy in a flight outside, if that is the case," Reshiram said. "Like the rest of you, I will wait here, both until you have healed and until this blizzard ceases. But after that, there will be no more waiting for our enemy's next move. We know where it is now; as soon as we are able, we take the fight to Kyurem."

Sorry this chapter took so long! Laziness and lack of motivation on my part was the main cause, though school never helps. However, my motivation's back now, and I think I might be able to get back to a chapter a week? Hopefully?

More importantly, OHMYARCEUSTHERESAGENFIVEPMDG AMECOMINGOUT. You guys do realize I came up with the idea for this fanfic and committed to it almost SOLELY because I wanted a Gen 5 PMD game so much, right!? IT'S TRUE. I'm so freaking psyched. AND IT LOOKS BEAUTIFUL, and yet it's still keeping to the traditional PMD gameplay, which I love. Not saying I wouldn't have been open to change, but keeping the same battle system certainly doesn't hurt anything. But really, guys, look at this fic. Well over 200,000 words and I'm not even done quite yet. If THAT'S not a testament to how much I've been looking forward to this Gen 5 PMD game long before it was ever even known to be a thing, I don't know what is.

Chapter 34: The Blizzard

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Blizzard

"Max? Do you have any time to chat?"

Max turned and saw Vulpix standing in the doorway of the little room that he and the rest of his team had been given during their stay at the Northern Guild. Quickly dismissing the pensive mood he'd been in, he smiled and gestured to the window of smooth, thin ice he'd been looking out. "This blizzard's been going on for two days now, and it doesn't look like it's going to let up soon. I'm not exactly going anywhere, so I'd say I've got some time."

Vulpix came the rest of the way in the room before sitting down next to him, tucking her now less-than-elegant tails around her to help keep herself warm in this guild made entirely of ice. "Isn't this room a bit small for you and the rest of your team? Aiden would fill up about half the room, wouldn't he?"

"Yeah, but he certainly keeps the room nice and toasty!" Max said cheerily. "Besides, you know as well as I do that the guild is a bit cramped, what with pokémon from all four guilds stuck here until the blizzard goes away."

"I suppose that's true," Vulpix said before lapsing into a brief silence.

Even though we're both humans, I really barely know her… Max thought to himself, trying to figure out what to say next. *We were teamed up at the Solstice Games, but she didn't talk much. And when she did, it was only to Bulbasaur, and sometimes to that doduo, Isola. From what I've seen of her since then, she's changed quite a bit… Wish I could say the same of myself.*

"So, um… What's up, Vulpix?" Max eventually prompted. "And where's Bulbasaur? I hardly ever see you without him."

Vulpix shrugged a bit. "I had some treatment for my burns earlier, so Bulbasaur went to explore the guild while I was busy with that. I'm meeting up with him later," she said, glancing down at her body. The multiple burns that had covered her since Reshiram's awakening, though still visible, did indeed look much better than they had just a couple days ago, with fur finally starting to grow back in over them. "What about you? Where's the rest of Team Courage? I was kind of hoping to talk to all of you."

"Oh, I just woke up a bit ago - I think they must have gone elsewhere without me so that I could sleep," Max said, rubbing his head feathers embarrassedly. "We can go find them, if you needed to talk to all of us…?"

Vulpix shook her head. "Actually, I think it's better this way, maybe. I just… I wanted to say thanks. You let Bulbasaur and I go after Reshiram, you covered for us… And even more than that, you stood up for me after the whole battle here was over, when Cobalion and Virizion were condemning me. I just wanted to say that I really appreciated it. You know, it's weird - I'd heard from some pokémon that you aren't very brave, but I've seen you be nothing but brave ever since the Solstice Games."

"Who, me? I'm flattered, but really, I'm not brave at all!" Max said, his voice rising into a bit of a squawk in his insistence. "I'm trying to be braver, but… You know, when fighting Abomasnow, I would've been toast if you hadn't come when you did. And I even had a chance to really get him - everyone else had given their all just to make a hole in all that ice around him - and then I just froze. I had the perfect chance and I couldn't attack, I just stood there. I'm really not brave at all. Nothing like you. I mean, you stood up to Reshiram himself without backing down."

"And you think that really matters? Me standing up to him?" Vulpix asked, her voice suddenly quieter. *I… I wish it could've been you that Reshiram woke up for. Any other human, really, someone who hadn't already screwed up as much as I have, someone…*

"Of course it matters!" Max said. "Do you think it doesn't?"

She looked away from Max, instead turning her attention to the constant whirl of snow and shadows just outside the window. "No, not really. Because I shouldn't have had to stand up to him in the first place. I was just so selfish as a human… I thought only about myself, and that's what made me make a deal with Kyurem, and it was that deal with Kyurem that made Reshiram mistrust me in the first place. I'm putting everyone at risk just by existing in this world. You, on the other hand - you care about others so much that you want to be brave for them. And even more important than that, others care about you enough that they want to be brave for you. That's what your team's all about, right? Team Courage. Four pokémon who just want to be there to support you, because you think first about helping pokémon, and after that about being scared. I think some pokémon call you petty because you care so much about others' opinions of you, but I think it's admirable."

Vulpix looked back to him, met his eyes for a moment, then promptly looked at the ground and mumbled, "Sorry. I shouldn't be prying in your personal matters like that."

Watching her go quite suddenly from inspirational speaker to this shy, muttering demeanor was enough to make a laugh force itself out of Max's beak. He quickly cut it off, not wanting to offend her, and explained, "I'm sorry, but it's so strange to see how different you are from moment to moment. Half the time you don't even seem like the Vulpix I met back at the Solstice games. Anyway, I think you're being too hard on yourself. At the very least, you've got Bulbasaur, and I'm pretty sure he'd go to the ends of the earth and fight anyone who got in his way, if it was for your sake. You've gotta be pretty incredible for him to care about you like that."

Neither of them said anything for a while as Vulpix took in the words and Max chose to let the truth of them hang in the air. Eventually, though, Vulpix took up the conversation again.

"Max, you were at the entire battle here against Kyurem's forces, right?"

Max nodded. "Up through the very end, when you came."

"Then… I heard that there were some pokémon there who had been taken over by Kyurem. And you and Cecil and Alexa fought them, and… What exactly happened to them?" She sounded worried, as if this question carried a great weight beyond simple curiosity.

"Well, they devolved and died," Max said. Then, all of a sudden realizing why Vulpix was probably asking, he said, "But that won't happen to you! You've fought Kyurem's control more successfully than anyone else, and you're linked to Reshiram now. You're definitely going to be fine, even if Kyurem gets control of you sometime before the rest of us manage to finish him off."

"I suppose that's true," Vulpix said, smiling a bit; Max got the feeling the smile was just to make him feel like she'd been cheered, though, empty of any real hope as it was. "Still… You know, even despite what you said, I wonder if I've really changed that much from how I was as a human. If not for Bulbasaur's sake and the possibility of the both of us going back to our regular team life, I don't think I'd even be willing to fight Kyurem at all, even with this entire land at stake and a lot relying on me. I'm just as selfish as ever."

"Do you really believe that?"

Vulpix met his eyes, but didn't respond. *Do I?* she wondered. *I honestly don't know… I like to think that I want to help everyone, not just myself and Bulbasaur, but I really don't know.*

Max held her gaze. *You know, I thought we were really different at first, what with her being so brave,* he thought, *but really we're not that different at all. We both have doubts in ourselves, and I think that's what's holding the both of us back.*

"You know, how about we make a deal?" Max suggested.

Vulpix tilted her head slightly to the side. "A deal?"

"Yeah," Max replied. "I'll believe that I'm really brave like you say, if you believe that you're as selfless as all your actions up until now have proven. How about it?"

Vulpix seemed perplexed at first, but then her smile grew and she nodded. "All right," she said with a bit of a chuckle. "Deal."

"What do you want?" Cecil asked, not even turning around as he sharpened his scythes against one another.

Cody was surprised Cecil even knew he was near; he'd approached quietly enough, the room was packed with other pokémon, and Cecil had his back to everyone. Though admittedly, no one was as close to Cecil as Cody was now. No one quite knew what to make of the once-criminal, so they were keeping their distance.

"Just want talk, sheesh," Cody replied, even though Cecil's question, though not welcoming, had been far from antagonistic. "You mind? Or you too busy?"

Still not bothering to look at Cody, Cecil simply continued to sharpen his scythes. Eventually, he shrugged. "Guess not."

Try to be a bit more friendly or no one here is ever going to trust you, Cody thought critically as he sat down next to the scyther. "So, um… How's it going?"

Cecil didn't respond.

Cody's fur bristled. "All right, fine, don't answer me. Just trying to be friendly, since we're both humans and all. You know, make small talk and all that stuff. Unless humans from your world are naturally rude?"

"Sorry," he said unrepentantly. "But did you come to talk about something in particular, or just talk? Because I don't just talk. That's not me."

"Oh, all right, fine, excuse me for trying to be polite and not getting right to the point," Cody grumbled. "You *clearly* have better things to do."

Once again, Cecil didn't deign to answer.

"All right, here's the thing. We've been cooped up in here a couple days, word gets around. If we get the chance, you 'n Alexa are planning on going back to your world, right?"

"Yeah," Cecil admitted. "What about it?"

"So, what, you don't have any doubts or anything about going back?" Cody said. "'Cuz you know, Alexa likes to talk, and she mentioned how much you love battling as a pokémon… And I have a teammate like that, and with a pokémon like her, I can't imagine her ever giving that up for anything. And you seem a lot like you, just not as loud and obnoxious. So why are you still wanting to go back to being human?"

Cecil paused the sharpening of his blades briefly. "My business, not yours."

For once, Cody didn't take offense. "The thing is, I don't know if I want to go home or if I want to stay here," he said. "I mean, I've been here so long that I don't, like*, really* think about it anymore, or at least not as often… but the fact is, I do really miss my family. My parents, my little siblings, all of them. And if there's only one chance to go back or not - because you know, that's how it always is in movies and stuff, and I don't see why this should be any different, since it's not like you can just have your own personal gateway to go back and forth between worlds - anyway, if there's only one chance, I don't know what I should do. Because if I did go back, I know that I'd really miss my team, too. Because they've become a sort of family, too,

and unlike my real family, they put up with me 'cuz they wanted to, not because they had to. They're absolutely infuriating at times, but I don't want to leave them. Especially not Isola… I'd really miss her. I mean, a lot. She stood by my side the entire time I was captured and still not in my right mind, and she helped bring me out of it."

Cody heard the soft scratching of talons on the floor just behind him, and he turned to see Alexa approaching.

"Well, your choice seems pretty obvious to me," she said.

"And how long have you been listening in?" Cody asked.

Finally smiling a bit, Cecil responded for her. "The entire time. Essentially."

"Yeah, well, forgive a girl for a bit of eavesdropping, eh?" Alexa said, nudging Cody a bit with her wing as she sat down right in between the two boys. "Anyway, I think you ought to stay. I mean, someone like Isola - well, finding one pers-, er, pokémon like that only happens once in a lifetime. You're pushing it if you think you can go back to your world and still find someone like her. Besides, everyone's gotta leave the nest some day, if you'll forgive my bird puns."

"Maybe we won't even get a choice," Cody said. "Maybe we'll be forced back. Or maybe there'll be no way to get back."

"Yeah, well, you're just dodging the question now," Alexa said. "Because what if the time comes and you still don't know which you'd choose, but you have to make the choice and you end up making the wrong decision because you didn't decide sooner? Then you'll regret it for the rest of your life. So figure it out."

Cody slunk against the ground a bit. "Okay, so help me out here if you're so smart, then. How are you so certain you want to go back to your world?"

"Easy," Alexa said. "Cecil and I finally got-"

"Alexa," Cecil said in a tone of mixed warning and embarrassment.

"What? You embarrassed that we're a couple or something?" Alexa said and, without waiting for his response, continued to Cody, "Anyway, we finally got together as humans, and then Kyurem got us. And then we lost each other here and he forgot that we got together, and then we got together again anyway. But we want to be, like, for real together, not just like friendship-together or rescue team together or anything like that, so we want to go back to both being humans."

"So what if it's not meant to be?" Cody challenged, not particularly surprised that they were a couple; rumors had already gotten around about that. "You act like it's so simple, but it's not. If you guys go back to being human and then it doesn't work out between you, then Cecil loses his awesome battling abilities and you lost your flying for nothing."

"Not for nothing," Alexa said. "For a chance. And I think a chance is worth it, especially for something like that. You agree, right, Cecil?"

Cecil nodded, though his face was flushing a bit with embarrassment.

"And there you have it," Alexa said. "And that's why I think you ought to stay with Isola and the rest of your team. Even if you can't be, like, you know, 'together' together, I'd still hate to be you if you and that Isola wound up in other worlds. Heck, I'd hate to be her, too, for that matter. I mean, everyone's different so maybe you think differently, but if I were you, the choice'd be pretty darn obvious."

That's what my heart is telling me to do… That's what I want to do, Cody admitted to himself. *But it's still not that simple. How can I just give up my family? Forever? Will they always think that I died there in that blizzard, among the cattle? That's not something anyone can just get over. Can I just pretend like I don't care how distraught they'll be?*

"Well, it's your call in the end, if we do get a choice," Alexa said. "Anyway, I was talking to Reshiram just a bit ago-"

"What, just chatting with him?" Cecil asked incredulously.

"Sure. Why not?" Alexa replied, using her wing to wave the matter off in her best imitation of a much more human gesture. "Anyway, he was wanting to talk to all of us humans. Just us. I found Vulpix and Max already, so they'll just be waiting on us now. So shall we go?" She didn't wait for an answer, instead opening her wings and flapping towards the main gathering hall where Reshiram still resided.

Cody and Cecil exchanged a glance, then followed after her without exchanging a word.

"I have called you all here - without the presence of either the guildmasters or your teams - because I wish to sort out the last of the details with you all before I am ready to come to a definite conclusion about the events that have transpired," Reshiram said once all five of the humans had gathered, his voice somehow quiet and calm-sounding even in the large, echoing chamber. "Moreover, you all have the greatest right to know how you came to be here. The Guildmasters will hear all in time, but you five deserve to know the truth first.

"As I said, though, there are still some loose ends that I have yet to put together," Reshiram continued. "Zekrom and I learned much while we slept this past decade, but only directly what pertained to this world and this land. So, firstly, I must ask… I understand some of your memories are incomplete, but if you are at all able, tell me the last things you remember of your world, what sort of world yours was, and what events led up to you being here."

The humans looked around at each other and, before long, Alexa spoke up. "Well, that's pretty easy for me and Cecil. I mean, I dunno about how many worlds might be being represented here, but we

come from a town called Lacunosa in a country called Unova in a world where pokémon a humans live together - though we humans could never understand them or anything. And the last thing that happened to the two of us is that we were attacked by the legendary monster of our town. It found us while we were out at night, and it killed us. And yet here we are."

"And that monster? What did it look like?"

Alexa turned to Cecil. "You stayed alive longer, and you faced it down. You probably remember it better."

Cecil shook his head. "I barely remember that night at all, or at least I didn't until you reminded me. The best I remember… I don't know. It was a monster, kind of… draconic? Long neck, smooth skin, small arms… And ice. That's more of what I remember. It was cold, and parts of its body were covered with ice, or something ice-like."

Reshiram nodded, and turned to Cody, who was next in the circle of human-pokemon. "You?"

"Oh, I died, too, that's for sure," Cody said. Then, with a shiver, he looked to the passage that led to the outside of the guild and added, "Actually, it was in a blizzard just like this. I was outside, and I something spooked the cattle - erm, you could call them tauros if you like, except not the same at all except generally speaking - and I got hurt when they ran, and then… well, I froze to death, I guess."

"And your world?" Reshiram asked.

"Not the same as theirs. Where I live, pokémon were made up. Not real," he said. "We had animals, which were like pokémon, but not smart or as powerful. Oh, and I'm not sure if this helps, but Emma - you know, the human who is under Kyurem's control now - she was from my world, too, but from years after I remember dying. And she said she didn't remember dying, but she was really sick last she remembered, so she might've."

Going one more space around the circle, everyone's heads turned to Vulpix. She looked at Reshiram and said, "You already know what happened to me."

"Yes, but I believe the others have a right to know as well."

She sighed and, looking around to them, said, "From what I've gathered, I come from Cody and Emma's world. I… I heard a voice in my head, promising me what I wanted if I gave myself over to it. I wanted something to happen in my life, for me to be important, and so I took the deal. And then, on the voice's command - on Kyurem's command, that is - I took my own life."

The reactions among those in the circle were varied at this news, ranging from a look of almost horror on Max's face to a sad yet cynical look of surprise on Cecil's.

"Yet even though I promised myself to Kyurem, I still have control of myself now, even if I didn't remember anything at all about myself until just recently," Vulpix said. "I don't know why that is, but I'll keep on fighting him, and I'll die rather than let him take control of me."

Reshiram, satisfied, turned to Max. "And you?"

"I come from Alexa and Cecil's world, almost for sure," Max said. "I recognize the places they named, and I think I might be from Unova myself… though a lot is still fuzzy. I couldn't remember much at first, except for my worst memory in life, so I thought I was here to do penance for that. But now… I don't think that's it." He closed his eyes tightly, trying to think. "I started having dreams a while ago, though they stopped now. Like Vulpix's dreams of Kyurem. And there were memories in them. There was something I was talking to. It wasn't human. It reminded me of a pokémon, but it wasn't like anything I'd seen. Sort of mid-sized, looked sort of dragonish like a gabite or something, but almost for sure an ice-type. I just called it an animal, though, because it definitely wasn't a regular pokémon, and it didn't feel… natural. I mean, it could talk, and pokémon can't talk. Not in my world.

"Anyway, it would only show up when I was alone, and it tried to offer me a deal? I think… No, I don't remember."

Reshiram let out a puff of breath. "I suspect that you do remember, and you'd rather not, because the offer was appealing. The thing you felt so guilty about - what was it that you wanted most that might've changed it? What did you always want most?"

Max thought for a moment and then, seemingly giving in, admitted, "He offered me the power to be strong. Strong enough to be brave. I don't think I ever accepted it, though, even if I admitted I wanted it. But I don't remember anything more than that. If I'm like the rest of you, I must've died, but…"

"Try to remember," Reshiram insisted. "I wish to have all of my facts straight. More than likely, if you did indeed die, that creature had something to do with it. It might've attacked you, or led you somewhere dangerous."

Max shook his head. "No, no, those aren't right. But… No, you're right. I… what was it?" Max pounded on his beak with his wings as he tried to think, as if the drumbeat of feather on beak would somehow jog his memory.

Suddenly, he stood up straight and, with a mixed look of fear and triumph on his face, he said, "That's it! I was driving a car - you wouldn't know what that is, Reshiram, but - anyway, he jumped out in front of me! That stupid animal jumped out in front of me, and it was bigger than ever, and I couldn't stop, and the impact… Well, I don't remember anything after that, but I suspect that that's how I died. I definitely could've died that way."

"That is all I need to know," Reshiram said once he was sure Max was finished speaking. "Between what you all have said, I think I have enough evidence to understand what has brought us all to this point. Zekrom and I learned much while our corporeal bodies slept, so much of what I know now comes from that time. Much of what has happened is beyond even my understanding, though, so please

bear with me as I start from the beginning and explain as much as I can."

He paused for the briefest of moments as he apparently gathered his thoughts, then began.

"At the beginning of this land, Zekrom and I existed as a single entity known as Rem, a pokémon that, just like us, embodied the very Spirit of the land. For ages, we remained as that single entity, hovering eternally far above the center of the land.

"At one point, however, something changed. I cannot say exactly what happened, but the thing that once helped to moderate and balance the Spirit of the land as it was embodied in Rem suddenly disappeared. Unable to control its own power, Rem was forced to split into myself and Zekrom. Since we were two opposite aspects of that same original spirit, we were able to reestablish the balance and continue to embody the Spirit of the land as we always had as Rem.

"Unbeknownst to us at the time, though, the shell of what once was our original body plummeted to the ground in the center of the land, taking on a life of its own, sustained by the massive amount of power Zekrom and myself had been forced to shed in order to maintain balance. Yet this thing, Kyurem, lacked any Spirit of its own, and thus was eternally doomed to be exactly what it was: a shell, empty. And because it is forever empty, it is also forever hungry. It wishes most of all to consume Zekrom and I, in a sense swallowing up this entire land and plunging it into its control. Even this would not be enough to satisfy it, though; it has and always will consume whatever comes into its path.

"Zekrom and I did not realize that Kyurem lived; we were too busy regaining the balance and, after that, it hid itself too well for us to notice. We are beings who exist due to Spirit, and were practically blind to the existence of something entirely spiritless. Kyurem stalked the land unhindered until Thundurus, Tornadus, and Landorus tracked him to his original crater, intending to put an end to him. They would have stood no chance, yet… This is where my

understanding fails, and I must wander into conjecture. Because Kyurem itself should have easily been able to defeat and consume them, yet it was forced to use its most desperate tactic in order to preserve itself. It froze both itself and its enemies, knowing that when it unfroze, the Spirits of the three would be completely suppressed by their long encasement in its ice. In pulling off this massive attack, Kyurem also filled in much of the crater with ice, creating the base for the places known today as Chilled Bog and the Battle Grounds.

"Now, as for why Kyurem could not defeat the three pokémon of weather, I cannot speak with certainty. Yet, based on what you all have told me, and based upon Kyurem's apparent goals, I can make a guess.

"Even once we split, Zekrom and I were less stable than before and, as such, less complete. We needed something outside ourselves to help balance our power. As Rem, we knew of other worlds and we knew of the truth of humans, though they were just myths to the pokémon below. When we split, we automatically understood that, though we could stay in balance in our new forms, an outside moderating force would make us truly complete again, still separate from each other but yet again equal to Rem in wholeness. That force, the natural once that had kept us as Rem, was lost; the only thing left to us were humans, creatures not of our world. So different from pokémon, but that was what we needed: some creature that could accommodate for the sudden strangeness of Zekrom's and my situation. By chance or by design, we understood that the Spirit of a true human hero could fill that gap, one for each of us. We understood this, yet were in control of ourselves well enough that we saw no reason to upset the balance of this world by somehow seeking out this link and trying to bring humans into this world.

"Kyurem, it seems, staked its hopes on this understanding. I believe that it realized that the two heroes could not only moderate and complete our powers, but control us as well. I believe Kyurem fragmented its own power and sent the fragments like meteors through time and space, throwing them at random towards other

worlds. It had already done this when the three pokémon of weather attacked it, which is why it was too weak to battle. Once its fragments of power landed on other worlds, their natural hunger sought out humans, and especially those humans who had the potential to be the heroes it needed. They killed those whom they locked onto. Stronger fragments of its power took physical shape mirroring Kyurem's actual form, such as the one that killed you two, Cecil and Alexa, or such as the one that led to your death, Max. Others, perhaps weaker fragments, took less solid forms: sickness, a blizzard, a voice.

"These fragments might have killed just the six humans we know of here, but I suspect they killed more - yet you were the only ones whose Spirits did not immediately cease to exist as we know them, instead surviving long enough to be dragged or guided or to this world. That alone makes you five, as well as the other human, exceptional. I suspect that perhaps, had Vulpix and Emma not come, two of you remaining four might have instead filled the need of Zekrom and I for heroes. Your Spirits… it is a bit of a difficult concept to describe, for the aspect that designates one as heroic lies solely within the Spirit itself, but… Best put, it is dedication, commitment to that which you truly deem important, regardless of risk. Dedication so strong that a deerling might risk her life to save a valley who did nothing but scorn her efforts for them, or so strong that a girl terrified of death would take her own life to achieve her goals."

Here, Reshiram paused meaningfully, looking to his own hero; ashamed though she was of her actions, Vulpix boldly met his gaze.

Then, Reshiram continued, "You all share that quality, that dedication, albeit in different ways. However, I lose track of myself - back to Kyurem's actions. After Kyurem froze itself, it lay dormant for many years as Zekrom and I continued to fly in continual balance around the land, oblivious to the threat that slept at the very heart of our circuit. Over this time, Kyurem's fragmented power began to return to it, slowly melting away the ice that encased it. I suspect that roughly ten years ago - when evolutions in the land stopped, and

when Zekrom and I were forced into slumber - is when Kyurem, though still frozen and not yet returned to its full power, finally awoke. What I do know for certain is that the Spirits of you humans began their trip into our world at that time, regardless of the time you died in your own worlds. It was the arrival of Emma and you, Vulpix, that caused Zekrom and I to fall into slumber; for with the two of you nearing this world, neither of us could be considered complete until awoken by and linked to you. As you already know, we contacted the Four Warriors before we were forced into sleep, so that they could protect us.

"Now, how exactly you humans got here remains a mystery to me - the fragments of Kyurem's power might have guided you back here, or your Spirits might have naturally come to the place from which your destruction originally emanated. The process was by its nature traumatic. Unable to have a human form in a world where humans do not naturally exist, you appeared here as pokémon, and some of you lost sections of memory in the process. If Kyurem had been at full power - that is to say, if the pokémon of weather had never confronted it, and it had been able to consciously wait this whole time for your arrival, instead of being frozen - then I have no doubt that its force of will would have dragged your Spirits to it, and everything would have been over before it had even begun. I still do not understand how you managed to avoid that fate, Vulpix; the fragment of Kyurem's power that latched onto you when you gave yourself to Kyurem as a human should have brought you straight to it. Yet it is good that you did indeed manage to avoid that fate. Otherwise, I would already be lost, subdued or absorbed by Kyurem through you."

Reshiram stopped now, apparently letting all that soak in for a few moments; none of the humans said a word. Eventually, Reshiram once again continued his explanation. "That is the majority of what you did not know up until now. The rest is the situation as you have experienced it since coming here - Kyurem loosed the pokémon of weather upon the land in its search for you humans, regardless of who was and was not a hero. Either Kyurem could not tell the

difference, or it simply hungered for all of you, since you are the only human Spirits in this world. He succeeded in two cases - Emma, who went on to aid in Zekrom's capture, as well as with you, Cody. Emma remains under his control, yet you somehow wormed your way out of his dominion, Cody. I suspect this is because in part due to Max's efforts to bring you to yourself, and in part because Kyurem is unbalanced right now while he tries to master Zekrom.

"Yet even though it is true that Kyurem can take control of you all even though you are humans, you all have proven that, for the same reason that only a human Spirit could complete Zekrom and I, a human Spirit is also the only thing that can combat Kyurem's influence. I cannot force any of you to fight Kyurem with Vulpix and myself, but each and every one of you will increase our chances. Any single one of you should be capable of bringing Emma to her senses; and if we can free Zekrom, then we might have a chance of defeating Kyurem. This will be not a battle of power, but one of Spirit; not even the Four Warriors or the Guildmasters will be able to do as much as the five of you. So I ask all of you: will you fight?"

The humans looked to one another, doubts showing in the eyes of all but Vulpix.

Taking a deep breath, Max suddenly stood up and said, "I'm not sure how much help I'll be, and I can't guarantee I won't freeze up again like I did against Abomasnow. But even so, I'll come."

"I'll fight," Cecil said. "That's what I've enjoyed about being a pokémon."

"And he wouldn't feel manly if he didn't fight now that he's actually needed," Alexa said with a bit of a giggle, her mood completely out of place considering the seriousness of the situation. "Anyway, if he's going, I am, too." And as if to emphasize her commitment, she glared down Cecil before he could say even a word of protest.

Everyone turned to Cody, and he squirmed a bit under their gazes. "Oh, fine, I'll do it. I'd feel like a jerk if I was the only one who didn't."

Reshiram dipped his head gratefully. "I thank you all for that, and I truly believe we might succeed with all of you there. Now, do you have any questions - anything at all that concerns you? Considering what all you five are doing to help this world, the least I can do is clear up any confusion as best I can."

"Actually, I do have a question," Max said, speaking up quickly, as if the question had been waiting at the front of his mind for a while now. "Why is it that I can make other pokémon evolve? Or at least it seems that way - it's happened with four pokémon now, and only when they were right around me."

"I heard about this," Reshiram said. "And the truth of the matter is that it is not fully through your own power. Vulpix is not the only one to whom a fragment of Kyurem attached; I sense a faint piece of its power within you, as well."

Max's feathers bristled in surprise. "Wait, what? But that can't be true! I didn't make a deal with him like Vulpix did! No offense, Vulpix."

Vulpix smiled forgivingly, though deep down the comment stung somewhat.

"You said yourself that you briefly dreamed of Kyurem, and Vulpix is the only other human who ever dreamt of its voice," Reshiram said. "I do believe that you didn't make a deal with Kyurem, though. The fragment is much too faint, and unlike with Vulpix, it is simply present - it has no physical form, nor does it have power over you. You said that, as a human, the creature you spoke to promised to give you the power to be brave if you gave yourself to it? And you admit that the offer was tempting?"

"Well, yeah," Max said. "It sounded nice, and I told it that, but I never agreed to it!"

"Then I suspect that the same thing that happened to Abomasnow happened to you, albeit under slightly different circumstances," Reshiram said. "Even if you never agreed, you were open to the

suggestion, and the fragment managed to worm its way into you. Perhaps it even gave you some of the strength you desired, regardless of whether or not you were conscious of it. Yet once you came here, you somehow mastered the fragment, rather than let it master you. I don't know enough about you to judge, but I suspect some aspect of your Spirit managed to bend it to your own use. Yet rather than using it to empower yourself, as you originally wished, you used it to empower others."

Max looked away, his feathers drooping sadly. "It's just because I'm a coward. I just rely on others to do the fighting."

"I doubt that," Vulpix suddenly spoke up. "That can't be how it happened with Aiden and Kuro, at the very least. You were braver than ever then. I bet it's because you care more about others than about yourself, when it comes down to it. And so you orient the power to others, rather than hoarding it for yourself." Then, under her voice, she muttered, "Didn't we have a deal? Believe that you're as brave as I know you are."

Max couldn't help himself; he smiled. "Well, maybe that really is it."

"Reshiram, I've got a question, too," Cody spoke up. "Actually, I'm kinda surprised no one else asked it yet. So here it is: are we going to be able to get back? You know, to our own worlds?"

Reshiram shook his head. "I don't know. There is a chance that Zekrom and I will be able to open a temporary gate if Kyurem is destroyed, but before we begin to restore the balance of ourselves and the land. But if we are indeed able to manage it, I must emphasize that it will be open only a short while; once balance is restored, there can be no travel between the worlds. I understand that some of you have come to care about this land and the pokémon in it, so the decision of whether to stay or go remains up to you."

"Told ya!" Alexa said to Cody, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Oh, shut it," Cody said sulkily. "I… I still don't know."

"Well, whatever you choose, we've got your back," a new voice said.

Everyone in the room turned to see Ryan entering the room, followed by Isola and Lisa. But they weren't the only ones coming in. Following just behind them was the Max's Team Courage; and last but not least was Bulbasaur bringing up the rear.

"I thought I told the guards to keep this room off-limits for the time being?" Reshiram said, though his voice was more amused than accusatory.

"Yeah, well, they *are* our teammates," Kara said snarkily from her usual perch on Zeke's back. "I think we had as much of a right to hear what you had to say as they did, after all we've done for 'em."

"Especially if you're trying to talk a member of Team Misfits into leaving!" Lisa said as she and the rest of the teams joined their respective members. "We aren't letting you go that easily."

"Of course, it's your decision in the end, Cody," Isola said, her voice quiet but sure of herself. "We'd all miss you, but we'd understand."

Cody didn't seem at all comforted by her statement; if anything, he just looked guilty that she was so understanding while he couldn't say whether or not he'd sacrifice his old life to keep this new one.

"Same goes for us, Max," Zeke said with a grin. "It's your call, and I know you'll make the right choice, whatever it is."

In a voice too low for the other pokémon to hear, Bulbasaur muttered to Vulpix, "If it's all the same to you, I *do* care whether or not you leave," he said. "You're not planning on it, right?"

She dipped her head momentarily, their foreheads meeting. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Well, I suppose it's just as well that all of you came," Reshiram said, silencing the rising conversations in the room. "Am I right in assuming you were eavesdropping on the entire discussion?"

"Pretty much," Lisa said unapologetically.

"Then you already know that your human friends must face Kyurem," Reshiram said. "And I tell you now that it has to be soon. We cannot wait for this blizzard to end. It has gone on for long enough for me to guess that it is sustained not by natural phenomena, but by Kyurem's power. And the further we get from the summer solstice, the more my power decreases. Ideally, we would wait for the equinox, when my power and Zekrom's would be perfectly balance, putting our combined power at its peak. However, I fear by then, Zekrom will be too far gone to be saved, if indeed she is not too far gone already.

"Though some of you are large, I believe I can carry all of you on my back; I'll be the only one able to get anyone through this blizzard, after all. All of you who are willing to fight alongside your human friends are welcome to come along. We will fly to where Kyurem waits, and we shall settle the matter one way or another, once and for all."

"We're definitely in!" Aiden barked excitedly. "Right, Kuro?"

"Right," Kuro said.

"And so is the rest of Team Courage!" Zeke said, speaking for both him and Kara.

Lisa slapped her tail against the ground. "And I'd die before I'd miss out on this battle! And where I go, my team goes."

Ryan and Isola exchanged an amused look, but neither objected.

"And you already know that I'm not abandoning Vulpix," Bulbasaur said.

Reshiram nodded. "So be it. We leave first thing tomorrow morning. Do what you must, but be ready to leave then."

Next chapter. This battle's finally going to happen, guys. We are getting so close to being done.

As for this chapter, I really liked it - got to tie up all the loose ends in the second part of the chapter (at least, I think I hit pretty much all of 'em that I wanted to), and in the first part, I got to have some nice little heart-to-hearts between the humans.

Anyway, since we're so close to the end, I've got a new poll up on my profile page, if you've got a chance to answer it. While reviews are, of course, the best way for me to see what you're all thinking of the story, the poll's pretty much just generally speaking a "how much do you like this story?" sort of poll. So if you've got a moment to spare, check it out, I'd appreciate it. ^_^

Anyway, yeah. Get pumped, guys, because some serious stuff's about to go down.

Chapter 35: The Final Battle Part 1

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Final Battle Part I

"I dare not land any closer," Reshiram said as his passengers - Alexa, Cecil, Team Courage, Team Misfits, and Team Rebirth - disembarked silently at the outer edge of Chilled Bog. "If I landed on the Battle Grounds themselves, it might put both myself and all of you in danger. I'll circle low above while you all go to search for Kyurem. I don't doubt that with me so close, its hunger will force it out of hiding soon. But you must be careful - though it will likely be located under the icy portions of the island, in reality, it could be anywhere. It might have even suspected that we'd come to fight it."

"We'll be fine," Alexa said with a playful flutter of her wings, though a slight tremor in her voice betrayed her true worry. "Right everyone?"

For a few seconds, no one responded.

"Right," Vulpix eventually said, determination filling her voice. "We'll be fine. All of us."

"Now that's what I like to hear!" Alexa said as she winged into the air, circling up high.

"Alexa, where are you going?" Cecil said. "We need to stick together."

"Just making sure you all aren't caked in mud by the time we get to the Battle Grounds," Alexa called back down. "Head a bit off to your left before going into the bog! There's a path of reeds that goes for a ways in, which probably means you won't have to get more than your paws dirty."

Cecil shook his head in frustration as Vulpix led the way in the direction Alexa had indicated. And though Vulpix was less than comfortable with all the water around her, shallow though it was in

most places, she was still glad that the course Alexa had found was mostly just a muddy, reed-filled path amidst the chilled pools of swampy grime.

"Hey, everyone?" Vulpix said as she poked her way through the tall reeds, trusting Alexa and the taller pokémon of the teams to warn them of any large danger, and hoping her own senses would detect any smaller, closer threats that could be lurking among the weeds.

"Something you want to say?" Max asked. "If so, we're all ears."

"For sure," Alexa said as she flew in a little lower.

Vulpix took a few more mud-coated steps as she collected her thoughts. Then, she replied, "If I do something out there… I mean, if Kyurem gets a hold of me and starts controlling me, then I don't want you guys to hold back. Fight me with everything you've got. Even if-"

"Don't you go there," Bulbasaur warned. "It won't have to go that far, because I know you. You won't let Kyurem in."

"But if you do get all mind controlled, *I'll* certainly be happy enough to kick some sense back into you," Lisa chimed, with perhaps more relish than was absolutely necessary. "At least, if I'm not too busy with this Kyurem guy."

For the briefest of moments, Alexa landed on the furry crown of Vulpix's head before flapping upward again. "But personally, I'm with Bulbasaur on this one. No way Kyurem'll be able to get you. We're *all* gonna be fine. You said so yourself."

Vulpix smiled as she pushed onward. "I know, I know. Just needed a reminder. Thanks, Alexa."

"That's what I'm here for. Moral support. And eye-in-the-sky. And maybe a distraction, too, if ya' need it. Not exactly good for much else," she said as she spiraled once more towards the grey, overcast skies.

From her perch on Zeke's back, Kara called out, "We sure Reshiram's still somewhere up there above the clouds? Sure he didn't just ditch us here?"

"I trust him well enough," Max offered. "Cody?"

"Guess so," Cody said. "But I got kinda dragged along on this whole thing and everything, so don't blame me if it turns out we shouldn't be trusting him."

"Squirming out of things, as usual," Ryan said as he stepped lightly through the bog, for once purposefully doing his best to avoid getting dirty in the cold mud. "You should really buck up for once. Be a real 'mon."

Annoyed, Cody splashed some mud on Ryan, dirtying his own tail in a rather bad attempt at making it seem an accident.

Ignoring the ensuing mudfight between the two pokémon, Kuro asked, "So long as we're asking the humans, what about you, Cecil and Alexa? What do you think of Reshiram?"

"He's awesome, of course!" Alexa said. "Wish I could fly that fast! That ride over here was something else entirely!"

Cecil shook his head. "I don't doubt that he means well, but… He was much too ambiguous about what he will and won't be able to do during the battle. Maybe he'll be able to win it for us, or maybe we'll have to rely on ourselves."

"And you, Vulpix?" Aiden asked. "You trust Reshiram, don't you?"

Vulpix nodded, glancing back at the much larger fire-type who'd addressed her. "Definitely. He'll do whatever he can to defeat Kyurem, and to get us all out of this in one piece."

As Cody shook the cold mud from his pelt, the mudfight over, he commented, "Yeah, yeah. You and your infinite trust. One of these

days, it'll get you hurt."

"It already nearly did," Vulpix replied, thinking of Streya, as well as the bodiless voice that had stalked her last days and weeks as a human. "I've learned my lesson."

The group soon broke down into smaller conversations to try to ward off thoughts of what was to come, but for a while, Vulpix led on in silence, Bulbasaur walking at her side but just a tad behind her. Every now and then, he opened his mouth as if to say something, but every time he closed it again without uttering a word.

Eventually, Vulpix, without turning her head or looking at him at all, said, "I never told you my real name, did I? It just… it's like I said before. It doesn't feel like it's mine anymore. And I don't want it to be mine anymore, not if it means acknowledging who I was as a human. You don't mind, do you? I guess I'm probably being silly, so-"

"It's fine," Bulbasaur said. "Really, it's fine. You're Vulpix to me, and you always will be."

She didn't respond. Then, still without looking at him, she continued, "But you know… I'm not sure how much of this is coincidence or what, but when we first met, you said that I held myself like a princess." Unlike the one other time she had acknowledged this conversation, she spoke of it this time as fact, without shame and with perhaps just a hint of nostalgia tinting her voice softer. "I didn't appreciate the compliment then. I thought you were mistaken. But I remember now that my human name, well… it meant princess. Or something close to it. And somehow, even back then, you knew that, or you got it by coincidence or something, but… I think this entire time, maybe you've known me better than even I could know me."

"If that's the case, then you need to believe me this time when I say that you're definitely gonna fight Kyurem and win," Bulbasaur said. His voice becoming quiet, he added, "Because… I can tell. You're trying to keep up a confident face for everyone else, but… You think you're going to die, or be taken by Kyurem, which is worse. And you

can't let that happen. Even if you're willing to go to your death to save this world… Please, just think of me for a minute. I know it's selfish, but Vulpix, I just… I don't know what I'd do if you were gone."

Tears were flooding his eyes, but to his credit, not a single one leaked out.

She still kept her eyes focused on the reeds ahead of her, but she nodded. "All right. I'll try to-"

The shrill, piercing whistle of something cutting through the air far above the ground-bound pokémon's heads, cutting off Vulpix midsentence; no one saw the source of the noise. But all of them heard the gasp the followed as soon as the whizzing noise was cut off, a tiny little cry that still somehow seemed loud enough to reach the far corners of the bog. And all looked up in time to see the seemingly miniscule figure of Alexa plummet to the ground, her wings flapping only once or twice before she gave in to the inexorable pull of gravity, falling unhindered into the waters of the swamp.

And with the grey sky as background, not one of them could miss the streamer of blood that trailed after Alexa, a messy streak of crimson paint against the cold, uncaring sky.

Cecil was the first to dash from the group, slicing reeds out of his way in his rush towards where Alexa had fallen. Vulpix, Bulbasaur, Aiden, Kuro, and Lisa followed in the next heartbeat, Vulpix once again at the head of this group despite the fear that choked her, knowing that each step she took could send her tumbling into one of the bogs' deeper pools rather than the paw-deep water she was currently charging through.

The rest of the group looked at each other for a few seconds, then followed more reluctantly; Cody took the lead, shouting, "Guys, wait up! This could be a trap, and-"

"I know!" Vulpix shouted. "All the more reason we can't let Cecil and Alexa face it alone!"

Cody sighed, but Max suddenly picked up his pace.

"Vulpix is right," Max said as he zoomed forward, talking as much to himself as to the others around them. "Whatever happens now, we face it together!"

Cody shook his head, but knew he couldn't argue, with either Max or what he felt was necessary deep down. He and Isola exchanged a glance, and she took just a moment to let him and Ryan on her back before charging ahead at her top speed.

Cecil was first to find the bird's small body, so light that the reeds had caught it before letting it hit the ground. When the rest of the group surrounded him - muddy, cold, and in some cases, afraid or angry - they saw Alexa held up delicately atop his scythes, the feathers on her chest stained the same bright crimson they had seen taint the sky. At the base of the upwelling of blood, a shard of clear ice poked out, the bulk of it no doubt buried deep within her chest.

At first they all thought she was dead, but then she shifted a bit and opened her eyes, looking up at Cecil. "Well, sorry 'bout this," she murmured, her words disjointed and difficult to hear, though the wind in the reeds was the only sound competing with her. "Guess… Fate really musta been jealous of a couple… as cute as us, huh?"

Cecil didn't say a word, but tears were flowing freely from his eyes as he stood there with her cradled in the cruel, unloving scythes that Fate had chosen to give Cecil instead of hands. Of the pokémon present, it was Ryan who now began to panic, saying that they had to stop the bleeding, they had to get back to a guild healer now. But Cody and Isola both gave him a glance that shut him up quickly.

Cecil paid Ryan's rambling no mind, his gaze trained steadily on the dying pokémon he held. "Alexa, I'm so-" a sob choked the statement

off halfway, and Cecil was forced to repeat. "I'm sorry. This is twice now. Twice… I couldn't…"

Alexa shifted, the flow of blood momentarily increasing, though it was still little more than a trickle now; her tiny body was already running dangerously low on that liquid of life. "Stop it," she said, now too quiet for anyone but Cecil to hear. "Your tears… They're falling on me. I'm already cold… cold enough. I'm okay, I'm just… cold."

She shifted once more, bringing her wings in more tightly to her chest, as if trying to ward off the great cold that only she could feel. A few seconds passed with her huddled in Cecil arms, desperately trying to return to the warmth, trying to get closer to Cecil's chest, where his own heart still beat, strong and warm.

Then her body relaxed. A wing slipped out of place, and her head fell, beak hitting the metal of the scythe beneath it; the metal reverberated like the death knoll of a bell, rolling over each of the observers and hitting them all like a blow with its audible finality.

"I couldn't stop Kyurem from killing her. Twice," Cecil said, his voice loud but wavering precariously, like a boulder perched at the top of a cliff. "Why?"

"We're… We're sorry, Cecil," Max said, trying to be soothing.

"I don't care if you're sorry!" Cecil shouted at him, but without looking away from the body he still held so delicately in his scythes, as if he were afraid he'd break it. "I want to know why!"

"There is no why!" Cody suddenly shouted, his fur bristling as he stood atop Isola's back. "Okay? There is no reason. Or if there is, it's Kyurem. He's scared of us, or he wants to antagonize us, wants to throw us off, or-"

Suddenly, Cecil and Vulpix - the two closest to the edge of the patch of weeds the group was currently standing in - looked out of the clumps of marsh grass, across the expanse of shallow water that

stretched out next to them. Everyone else missed the small, dark shape they saw retreating into the reeds opposite them. They missed the flash of red of the feathery headdress-like ornamentation, were oblivious to the brief flash of its long, white claws, and didn't catch the slight sheen of unnaturally frost-covered fur.

And before anyone knew it, both Cecil and Vulpix were off, dashing without thought towards where the shape had disappeared, chasing after the motion they now saw in the reeds ahead. Anger and rage and fear filled both of their eyes in different ways: Cecil's tumult of raw emotions bubbled up as he ran with Alexa's body still held against his own, while Vulpix's older, but more focused grudge drove her on alongside him.

The pokémon they chased was no longer a sneasel. The weavile that ran ahead of them was now surely nothing but a puppet, without anything of the biting, vicious personality that had so characterized her before now. But both Vulpix and Cecil recognized Streya nonetheless. Both knew the blow that had killed Alexa had to have been her ice shard attack. And if either guessed that what was happening now had to be a trap, they paid no heed and continued their chase, oblivious to all but the shadow that always stayed just ahead of them.

"H-hey!" Bulbasaur shouted as, after a couple seconds of shock, he began to run after them. "Vulpix, stop!"

Everyone else joined in the chase as well, all now hyperaware of how exposed they were, how one of them had already died, how they were now getting nearer and nearer to the glacier-filled part of the Battle Grounds as they ran through the bog, and how Vulpix and Cecil were still charging blindly on despite all this.

Though the weavile was fast, Cecil and Vulpix were gaining ground, slowly pulling farther and farther away from the rest of their group and ever closer to the fleeing figure. As they neared the glaciers and the muddy bottom of the bog became more solid, they didn't so much as notice how unnaturally cold the water at their feet was

becoming. They pulled closer and closer, until - of all things - the weavile slipped, falling into the mud.

Cecil zoomed right past, carried on by his momentum; but Vulpix, somewhat farther behind, had enough time to react and pounce, holding Streya face-down in the muddy, paw-deep water. But as she did, the frost melted from Streya's weavile body and she shrunk, diminishing into a sneasel that seemed smaller and more pathetic than the sneasel she once had been.

At the sight of her old form, Vulpix felt the fire rising up inside her, so much that it hurt to hold it back. In the past, Streya had tricked her, antagonized her, and chased her and Bulbasaur without giving them a moment's rest; but even all that Vulpix wouldn't have killed for. But up until that ice shard, Alexa had been doing her all to keep them all upbeat, to remind them that they could win, even though Alexa herself was almost undoubtedly the least prepared for the battle ahead.

"Any minute now, I'm not going to be able to hold this flamethrower back," Vulpix whispered, letting up a little so that the sneasel could turn her head sideways and breathe a bit. "Why shouldn't-"

But Streya wasn't listening. The moment she'd turned her mud-covered face to the air, she had started laughing, her voice weak and yet somehow all the more malicious because of it.

"The Lord of Ice never took my Spirit because he knew I was more useful as myself. Even when I found him here in the glacial caverns, he beat me and left me to die… And then you found me. We met for the first time."

As Streya broke out into another laugh, Vulpix suddenly found Cecil back at her side. "Move aside," he said, anger just barely concealed behind a veneer of calm. "Let me kill her before the others catch up with us."

But Vulpix didn't move; she was transfixed by Streya's words as the sneasel continued, "Even when the Lord of Ice took control, he didn't take my Spirit. he thought maybe, I could be one last…" the smile on Streya's face suddenly grew, stretching to each of her suddenly wide-open, bloodshot eyes. "… one last distraction. And now that I've done my job, my Spirit belongs to him."

Vulpix felt the body beneath her go completely limp and the head fell back into the muddy waters, not a single bubble rising to indicate even the faintest hint of a breath.

And, all of a sudden, a blast of pure, windless cold came from the glaciers ahead, instantly chilling everyone to the bone - not just Cecil and Vulpix, but all those in the group behind them as well, though they were still several dozen feet away. The force of the chill would have been enough to knock them off their feet; yet all the mud and water that they stood on and that coated their bodies had frozen immediately, holding them firmly in place. Even the larger pokémon such as Aiden and Zeke were stuck, since their own weight had forced their paws farther down into the mud with every step.

"Hey, what gives?" Lisa asked, her own small body frozen up to her hips.

"Not good, not good," Cody said as he and Ryan got off of Isola's back, after shaking off the worst of the stiffened ice and mud from their fur; they, along with Kara, were the only ones not stuck in the ground. "I don't like this… Guys, hurry up and get out!"

"Easier said than done," Vulpix shouted back at them, having just tried to melt the ice around her own feet with a flamethrower. "It's refreezing as fast as I can melt it. Aiden, Kuro?"

Both looked up from their own efforts, fur bristling. "Same," Kuro confirmed.

"I don't care, just let me at that sneasel!" Cecil shouted at Vulpix as he glared at the body almost completely buried beneath the ice.

"She's already dead," Vulpix said. "And so is Alexa. Attacking a dead sneasel isn't going to bring Alexa back to life."

Cecil looked down at the small, lifeless body still held against his body by one of his scythes. And at that moment, a rumbling suddenly shook the ground, and a nearly deafening cracking noise came from the glaciers ahead.

"Listen, if you need to take out your anger still," Vulpix said, not taking her eyes off the large, dark rift that had opened in the nearest wall of ice, "then take it out on who's really responsible. Because right now, the two of us are right in the line of fire."

Another cracking noise cut through the air as the chasm opened ever wider and Vulpix caught sight of two eyes glinting in the darkness.

"Now would be a *great* time for Reshiram to get his big flaming butt down here!" Kara said as she, Cody, and Ryan all scurried up to the front, placing themselves just ahead of Vulpix and Cecil.

"So you *did* bring Reshiram?"

The voice rumbled out of the chasm, a deep, hollow voice, like someone speaking from far within a bottomless pit. And as it spoke, the creature in the glacier advanced until, finally, it emerged into the dim greyness of the outside, illuminated in all its monstrous grotesqueness.

It was quite unlike any pokémon any of them had seen, completely lopsided and asymmetrical. One arm seemed to be made of ice, while the other was a brutish black and electric blue appendage, not entirely unlike what some of them knew Zekrom to once look like; the head, likewise, was half icy and half black; the wings matched the arms, yet were almost comically small in comparison, not even half their length; and the tail was thick and dragonish, though deep within its core, dim sparks of blue electricity flared as if struggling for life.

"I need him," the monster, Kyurem, said as it half walked, half crawled forward, using its overly bulky arms to stabilize itself as it stumbled forward across the bog of ice, slowly moving closer to where Vulpix and Cecil were frozen in place. "He'll join with Zekrom and I - we will be whole again. I hunger… I shall hunger no more."

"Well, you're gonna have to go through us first!" Cody shouted out, uncharacteristically bold.

Ryan shot him a confused look, but Cody just smiled and looked up.

No one else had a chance to look up and see what Cody was so happy about, though they all found out nonetheless; in another moment, Kyurem was engulfed in white-hot flames. As Kyurem's roar of pain filled the air, everyone found themselves able to move once more, the bog turning to slush around their feet. Either the heat from Reshiram's flames was enough to melt it even from afar, or the distraction was enough for Kyurem to lose his concentration and release his icy grip.

But before anyone could think of what to do next, another roar joined Kyurem's as Reshiram suddenly spiraled to the ground, changing his course just enough so that he crashed not into Kyurem itself, but into the glaciers just beyond, sending fragments the size of Aiden splintering off and shattering against the ground below.

"Reshiram, what happened?" Vulpix shouted as she watched Kyurem warily, though at the moment, it was struggling to even right itself once more.

Reshiram shook himself, getting to his feet. "I… I could feel the attack. I can't fight Kyurem. Zekrom is in there, and Zekrom and I are one. I can't fight it directly, not with my fire, at least." Reshiram opened his wings and, shakily at first, but then more strongly, began to circle low above Kyurem's head, just out of the monster's reach. "But it can't fight me, either."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Max called up as he and the others regrouped with those nearest to Kyurem.

"Fight Kyurem. Get Zekrom out of there - I'll be fine so long as I'm not the one doing the attacking," Reshiram said. "Until Zekrom is removed from this, Kyurem and I are at an impasse."

"Why must we fight at all?" Kyurem asked, finally on its feet, though for now it stayed where it was, moving only its eyes as it stared hungrily at the circling Reshiram. "I don't want to hurt anyone," it said, monotone. "I'm just hungry… So, so hungry… So, so cold…"

Its eyes glazed over and it turned to look at the ragtag group of pokémon, though still it did not move from its position. And as it watched them, it said only one word.

"Vulpix."

Everyone turned to see Vulpix clearly struggling against some unseen force, the necklace she wore quite suddenly a collar once again. And it was slowly but visibly growing outwards, crystals sprouting from the necklace base and freezing her fur.

Before anyone could stop her, she shoved her way to the front of the group and fired off a fire blast, even from this distance managing to hit Kyurem on its icy arm. The monster stumbled backwards as if stung, cradling its arm.

"I don't belong to you!" Vulpix shouted at him. "So get out of me already!"

Kyurem took a step forward, saliva flowing from its mouth. "I've already tasted your Spirit. You gave it to me. It is rightfully mine."

The ice of the collar spread suddenly, reaching up to the base of her ears, back to her shoulder blades, and covering her chest.

"My Spirit belongs to me, and only me!" she said, and the frost once again receded, though only somewhat. *For Bulbasaur's sake and for the sake of this world, I can't lose control of myself now!*

Everyone was at a loss of what to do. Kyurem was staying put, so they didn't attempt to attack yet; but the ice was still growing at Vulpix's neck, despite her occasional successes at forcing it back. Max looked up and, like anyone else, could see Reshiram still circling. Yet he noticed something else. A faltering flap of the wings here, the occasional sputtering of the tail flame that otherwise stayed brightly illuminated.

Reshiram… He's being attacked, too! Through Vulpix! If we don't do something…

Max cast one last glance to Vulpix, struggling as she was against her necklace.

I can't hesitate. Maybe I've never been able to be brave enough to save anyone before… But now, I will be!

Without consulting anyone, he charged forward, wings flapping as he ran, as if he could somehow take flight if he only tried hard enough. Kyurem seemed surprised for a moment and lashed out wildly with his uninjured arm, but the blow went far above Max's head, allowing him to continue in, building up the power of the first attack he'd learned as a pokémon. He released the ancientpower when he was literally right under Kyurem, hitting the titan in the bottom of its jaw before dodging back away, just out of reach.

"Reshiram, are you all right?" Max shouted out as the increasingly clumsy Kyurem lashed out at him once more but, overextending itself, fell over in the process.

Reshiram shook himself midair. "Yes, I'm fine, but he's trying to get to me through Vulpix!" he shouted. "You all have to keep it distracted until we figure out how to release Zekrom from it! It's still off balance

from having only Zekrom in it - just be careful and you'll be fine! And Vulpix, you get out of there!"

Everyone looked at each other in one last moment of solidarity before the charge. Everyone, that is, except for Lisa, who was already charging in for the attack.

"Well, no sense letting her have all the fun, right team?" Ryan said to Isola and Cody in the brief moment before the three of them hurried after her to help.

"And we've gotta help Max!" Zeke said as he led the charge for Team Courage, sparks trailing off behind him.

Vulpix, no longer so visibly strained despite the ice still creeping out from her collar, was left with Bulbasaur, who as of yet refused to leave her side, as well as with Cecil, who seemed less afraid of battle than he was conflicted about what to do with the body he still carried, the body of the one person he had come all this way for.

"So, Vulpix, are we running?" Bulbasaur asked.

Vulpix shook her head. "I can't. Even if they're distracting Kyurem now, the ice is still growing. If I don't fight, it'll grow faster. Got my back?"

Bulbasaur grinned. "Always."

"And you, Cecil?" Vulpix asked.

He looked down at Alexa, his gaze numb.

Vulpix nodded to him. *He's lost his whole reason for being here.* "We need you, but…" She trailed off, then ran off towards the battle, closely followed by Bulbasaur.

Cecil watched numbly as Team Rebirth dove straight into the battle, weaving into the action as if they'd been there from the beginning, dodging and attacking. Kyurem almost immediately locked onto

Vulpix, but she was almost better off that way; all its attacks fell short or went wide, putting those around her in more danger than herself.

Though Kyurem roared in pain each time someone landed an attack on it, it didn't slow down at all, lashing out just as powerfully as ever. Aiden, the largest target, inevitably was hit, followed soon by others. Cody was scraped by a glancing blow from the tail; Kara and Ryan kicked away in one of Kyurem's many missteps; Zeke stunned after being caught in Kyurem's grasp and thrown back into the bog a ways. They each took their blows and, after only a moment's rest, returned to the battle to do their part. Yet Cecil continued to just stand and watch from a distance.

"Reshiram!" Vulpix shouted upward when she got a free moment, backing up from the action. But before she could say whatever she meant to say, she realized she'd misjudged Kyurem's reach, and for once, its attack landed, knocking her back.

To most of those battling, it was just another minor setback; they knew she would be back on her feet in no time, assuming she wasn't too fazed by the blow. Bulbasaur was the only one to pause mid-battle to make sure she was all right.

And as soon as he did, he immediately abandoned the battle with Kyurem. "Vulpix! Look out!" he shouted, running as fast as he could, trying to outpace the sawsbuck he now saw running towards his fallen partner. "It's Emma!"

Vulpix lifted her head, but was still too busy coughing up mud and catching her breath to get to her feet properly.

She must have been hiding this whole time, in the reeds somewhere, Vulpix thought, looking at the mud that clung to the sawsbuck's icy pelt. *I've got to dodge or run or fight or something!*

Vulpix tried to get to her feet, and managed the action only when it was too late. Icy energy was forming between the oncoming

sawsbuck's antlers, and in another moment, the ice beam would launch and undoubtedly hit its stunned target.

If the ice beam hits… Will it just injure me, or will it encourage the necklace?

There was no time to think about it further. The ice beam launched and hurtled through the air towards Vulpix with deadly accuracy. It was only at the last minute that Cecil, who had seen Emma coming even before Bulbasaur, finally stepped in, blocking the beam with his free blade.

Without dropping Alexa's body, he charged forward and met Emma head on, slashing out at her with his free scythe and meeting one of the icy antlers, the sound of ice on steel grating the air. He dodged the energy ball she mustered and attacked with another slash, grazing her side. As Vulpix and Bulbasaur watched while the other pokémon continued their battle with Kyurem, it was hard to say which of the two combatants was more emotionless in battle. Emma, puppet that she was, was the obvious choice, and yet Cecil betrayed no anger now, no sadness, no thirst for revenge. He seemed the same as when Team Rebirth had first fought him: a pokémon made only for the battle itself, caring about nothing outside of victory.

Only the limp body of a pidgey held constantly, even throughout the battle, told them that the Cecil who fought for them now was unimaginably different from the one they had fought against back then.

But soon, Alexa's presence was his undoing. Unable to raise his other scythe to block, there was nothing he could do to stop one of the sharp antlers from swinging into his torso just between his shoulders, impaling him fully on one of the tines.

Yet before he would give in - before he could finally give himself over to death and join the pokémon he still held against his side - he landed one last blow, swinging his free scythe down on the antlers at their thickest point, where they sprouted from Emma's head like

trees from the ground. Bits of metal and ice rained down from the point of contact as both scythe and antlers broke under the force, stunning the sawsbuck so profoundly that, for a moment, Vulpix was certain she saw something of Emma's Spirit in her eyes as she backed up, throwing her head back and forth as if attempting to shake off Kyurem's control.

"Bulbasaur, warn me if she comes at us again!" Vulpix said as she ran over to where Cecil had fallen into the mud, one of Emma's broken horns still stuck in his chest. Though he was dying, he still held Alexa against his body; only the tip of one of her wings had gotten muddy when he'd fallen.

"Cecil, just don't move," Vulpix urged. "If I take out the antler, I can close the wound, or-"

"Maybe…" Cecil muttered.

Vulpix paused. Realistically, she knew he didn't have a chance; the least she could do was listen to what he had to say. *I don't want anyone else to die, but… There's nothing I can do. There's nothing any of us can do for Cecil now.*

"If you defeat Kyurem, if you open the door back to our world…" Cecil muttered. "Maybe… We've died once and come back to life. Maybe…" his mouth continued to move, but his words were too faint to make out.

"… maybe you'll both find your way back to your world. Together," Vulpix finished for him as she watched the last breath leave his body, instinctually knowing both what he wanted and that there wasn't a chance that it could happen. Right now, death was death. There was no fragment of Kyurem guiding their souls anywhere, no way for them to find their way back, even if their Spirits somehow lived on past the death of their physical bodies, as before. "You'll definitely find your way back. And I'll make sure it happens," Vulpix lied as she saw the last breath leave his body. "And in order to do that…"

"Vulpix, watch it!" Bulbasaur said as he sent a volley of razorleafs over Vulpix's head, slowing but not stopping Emma, who was once again advancing on Vulpix.

There was a roar from Kyurem in its own nearby battle, and some instinct caused Vulpix to deviate from her usual attack strategy. Instead of putting more distance between herself and Emma before continuing the battle with ranged attacks, she instead charged at Emma, liquid flame spilling from her mouth as she leapt up and bit down on the sawsbuck's neck, refusing to let go.

The her mouth was too small and her bite too weak to do much damage in itself, the attack nonetheless kept her off the ground when the reason for Kyurem's most recent roar came to fruition: like before, the entire bog froze over as a wave of freezing cold radiated out from Kyurem, glaciating the bog in an instant. For a moment, even Emma was forced to pause due to her hooves being frozen in the ground, though some trick of Kyurem's let her slip out of the ice soon enough to continue her attempt to throw Vulpix off.

Vulpix knew she could only hold on for so long, and so she dropped strategically in order to land as far away from Emma as possible while still ending up on her feet, though she found it difficult to keep her footing on the solid field of ice that the bog had become. She took one glance when she heard Reshiram's roar as the legend rejoined the battle, intending to melt the bog once more; and she saw what would have been the saving, melting blast of fire blocked midair by a blast of lightning from Kyurem.

Reshiram's just trying to melt the bog without Kyurem getting in the way, and everyone else is still frozen… Guess it's just me and Emma, Vulpix thought, aware of how little she could move her head now; the ice had once again crept up her neck, making it difficult though not impossible to move it. *But this is the chance we've been waiting for! If I can hold out for long enough to bring Emma to her senses, then Zekrom will be freed!*

"Emma! Is that you?" Kara's voice came across the ice towards them as the galvantuala finally caught sight of what was happening outside of the battle of blocking between Kyurem and Reshiram.

Emma paused for a moment at the sound of Kara's familiar voice, and Vulpix saw her chance. Darting in closer, Vulpix loosed a close-range fire blast, hitting Emma in the chest.

"Kara, keep talking!" Vulpix managed to shout out before Emma recovered and attacked with an ice beam; Vulpix dodged so that the beam only grazed her shoulder. But just that little graze was enough to make things worse for Vulpix. As she tried to move, she found her whole left foreleg was suddenly almost completely inflexible, covered in a thin layer of ice.

I have to end this, and fast! I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out!

Vulpix launched another fire blast, but the ball of fire she managed was inaccurate, missing Emma completely as the sawsbuck readied another ice beam. Lacking any way to dodge more gracefully, Vulpix threw herself to the ground and managed to miss that attack. But Emma was soon ready with another one, and as soon as Vulpix had managed to get herself off the ground, the second attack hit her in the back, freezing her further and spreading the ice across her back and to the top halves of the rest of her legs.

"Vulpix!" Bulbasaur shouted. "Vulpix, you can do it!"

Vupix tightened her focus. *I have to. For Bulbasaur. But… Can I really? Without overheat, can I do it? It's the most daring attack, the one that would get through to Emma the best… but it leaves me too wide open. I'm not sure if I could do it and still hold back the ice.*

The next ice beam Vulpix sniped in midair with a flamethrower, the two attacks colliding and filling the air with steam. Vulpix could no longer see Emma in the sudden, volatile fog, but she could still hear her hooves against the ice; she shot off a fire blast in that direction,

the steam in that area dissipating as the superheated fire cut through it and right into the sawsbuck's side.

"Emma, you've got to wake up!" Vulpix said. "I never met you in real life, but you have a friend, Kara, who came all this way to save you! And all of us want you back to your senses, out of Kyurem's control!"

"She's got that right!" Kara shouted. Stuck in the ice just like the rest, this was the best she could do to help her friend. "And I'm sure not going to forgive you if you hurt anyone else right now! You're better than that! You came to our valley and got yourself hurt rather than walk away and let us be tortured by those bullies!"

Emma faltered, tripping and falling to her knees, but any breakthrough she was having was short lived. A roar echoed out from Kyurem as it shouted, "She is mine! You're both mine!"

Vulpix felt the ice creep further down her legs, as well as up her tail and towards her eyes. And she saw Emma getting up once more, the glazed, frost-covered eyes once again veiling any human soul that was trapped deep within them.

Vulpix took a deep breath, stoking the flame within her as high as it could go and relenting. *The ice is too much. I can't dodge anymore, and I… I can't fight off Kyurem. Not for much longer.* The fire within her grew as she accepted what was to come, as well as what she had to do. *In that case… Well, I've got to make this overheat count!*

Fire flooded her entire body with pain, her inner flame stoked as it was. But she didn't mind; if anything, she appreciated the sensation. It meant she was still her, still in control of her own actions, still ready to do whatever it took to save this world, to save Reshiram and Zekrom, and - most importantly - to save Bulbasaur.

She just barely held the fire back as she pushed it higher, feeding it with her own determination. And she continued to hold it back as she watched a sphere of icy energy forming above Emma's head, in the space between where her antlers should have been. Vulpix held

back the fire as long as she could, and then, at the very last moment before Emma could launch her ice beam, she finally released it.

The heat coursed through Vulpix's body and out her mouth, as if her body was only a channel, the means of conveying this greater fire to where it was most needed. As if she were a weapon that could be easily replaced if the heat that now ripped through her body burned her up entirely. Ignoring the pain, she held the beam of fiery energy right on course, keeping it steadily trained right on Emma's chest even as the sawsbuck staggered backward due to the force of it.

And Vulpix kept that overheat dead-on for as long as her breath out could last, despite the burning of her mouth and the blackness that was creeping in around the corners of her vision. She kept the attack going for what seemed like ages, so concentrated on it that she was completely oblivious to the pained shout of Kyurem that continued for the attack's duration.

But then it was gone. Vulpix's vision cleared as she collapsed to the ice beneath her, possessing only enough energy to lift her head and see what she had done. Ahead of her, the sawbuck was melting away so that, in seconds, only a deerling with a burnt ear remained; and off at the larger battle nearer to the glaciers, blue sparks flew through the air as one pokémon - a majestic black pokémon that rivaled Reshiram in size - seemed to slide out from Kyurem, leaving only a grey, disheveled but menacing dragon of ice behind.

But better than any of that - better than the fact that Reshiram had kept any of the others from getting hurt, better than the heat from Zekrom's electricity that was warming the ice and allowing everyone to move again, better than Emma finally being a deerling again - was the sensation Vulpix felt, a sensation of lightness and mobility and warmth. Though her nerves felt almost numbed by the earlier pain, she could feel no ice anywhere on her; if the necklace remained, it was so small that she could no longer feel it hanging at her neck.

The overheat… It burned away the ice on both of us, Vulpix thought as she sunk down a bit, the ice beneath her melting away, turning

back into bog. *It's gone. The ice is gone. I'm exhausted, I can't even move because I'm so tired, but… Did I do it? Is that it? Will Reshiram and Zekrom…?*

Something else was happening to the legends. Zekrom, free now though she was, seemed to be going out of control, lightning radiating out from her and putting all those around her - Reshiram, Kyurem, and even the farther away Team Courage and Team Misfits - in danger. Though the sparks rapidly seemed to be diminishing in power as Zekrom gained control of herself, Reshiram in turn seemed to be growing more unstable, plumes of flame leaping out from his tail and leaking from his mouth.

And past it all, Vulpix saw Kyurem backing away so as to avoid the heat and electricity. And yet the monster's eyes were trained not on Reshiram and Zekrom. Instead, Kyurem met Vulpix's gaze, its misshapen mouth agape in what seemed to Vulpix to be a frightening, victorious smile.

Vulpix's vision began to dim again, and she knew something was wrong. In direct contrast to her earlier overheat attack, she felt cold lacing her veins and covering her body, radiating out from the necklace she realized still clung to her neck like a noose. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw frost coat her paws; she turned her head and saw that, already, her little vulpix body was completely encased, from her still crumpled tails to the tip of her nose. She saw Reshiram and Zekrom rushing towards her, flying just above the ground, as if they could save her if only that could reach her just a bit faster.

"You left yourself wide open," Kyurem's voice rung out; Vulpix could no longer tell if the voice was external, or simply in her head. "You let down all your defenses in order to land that one attack. You took the other hero from me, but until I get her back, this is better. I couldn't eat her Spirit. She never gave herself over to me. But now… Now I shall finally taste the human soul!"

They won't make it in time, Vulpix thought and, turning her attention from Reshiram and Zekrom, she used the last of her strength to turn

her head to Bulbasaur, who was at her side, watching her with tears in his eyes. His mouth was moving, and he seemed to be shouting something at her, but she could no longer hear him.

Despite the stiffening ice, Vulpix forced an apologetic smile to her face. "Sorry, Bulbasaur," she said, quietly. "Guess I'm not as strong as you believed I was."

She wanted to resist more, to fight, to not let Kyurem get to her no matter what. But in the end, Kyurem was right; she'd spent herself both physically and mentally on that last attack, and what resistance she might have put up seemed itself frozen.

I don't want to leave… I don't want to die!

Blackness filled her vision and she felt herself sinking down, ever colder, closer and closer to Kyurem's emptiness, and her Spirit squirmed and fought like a caterpie caught in a pidgeot's talons, a caterpie conscious of just how little it could do against the hunger-driven power of the pokémon it was held by.

Bulbasaur… No! I don't want to leave you!

And then she was gone. No more pain or fear or struggling, no more guilt for who she was and no more love for the partner who had done everything he could for her. She was gone, wholly and entirely, consumed by the emptiness.

Bulbasaur didn't move from where he was as he continued to shout at Vulpix, calling for her to come back. Calling and calling until his voice was hoarse, calling out even as the ice glowed and Vulpix changed and grew, her dim orangey fur lengthening and whitening with ice, her scraggly tails unfolding and splitting into even longer, more jagged tails, her face narrowing into something more demonic. And he kept on calling to her even as her eyes iced over, though what happened to her eyes not like the frosty glaze that had covered the eyes of Emma and Cody. Rather, it was as if her eyes were in

their entirety suddenly made of ice; no color of any sort could be seen in the crystal spheres.

"VULPIX!" Bulbasaur shouted one last time when the transformation was complete, when the pokémon that stood in front of him could no longer be called a vulpix at all. Even the term ninetails wouldn't be apt to describe the creature before him, covered in white fur made entirely of ice.

But no matter how loudly Bulbasaur shouted, there was no longer anything of Vulpix left to respond to Bulbasaur. No matter how many tears fell from his eyes to join the chilled bog below, he couldn't bring back the partner who meant the world to him.

And soon, the dying echoes of Bulbasaur's last call to Vulpix were covered up by the victorious roar of Kyurem, who had finally devoured the Spirit that had for so long eluded its grasp.

Sorry this took so long! I keep on thinking I'm more motivated (because I always feel motivated WHILE writing), but then I actually get to needing to start the next chapter and I can NEVER convince myself to do it. But once I do, I finish in three or four days, depending on how busy I am.

Also, just for the record, everything I'm writing I planned out well before Black Kyurem was ever revealed, I'm just basing the details on Black Kyurem since it so conveniently fit. Also for the record, I have no idea how Black and White Kyurem come about, since I only just got Black 2 and haven't yet gotten to that point, and I've been avoiding spoilers.

But… sheesh, I swear, I get way too emotional… THIS FREAKING CHAPTER. I thought only this whole ending bit with Vulpix would get me, but… Alexa's scene. I don't even know why, but I just started bawling while I was writing it. Just… poor Alexa and Cecil. And Vulpix. DEAR ARCEUS, why can't I just write happy things once in a while? :'(

Anyway, I swear I'll try to get Part II out sooner. Lately, that doesn't mean much… but still.

Chapter 36: The Final Battle Part 2

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Final Battle Part II

Team Misfits and Team Courage didn't know where to look, what to do, or what was going on. Bulbasaur was further in the bog, horrified and paralyzed with indecision, staring at the icy ninetails just in front of him; Emma was lying in the bog, with Kara already at her side, trying to bring the deerling to her senses; nearer to Cody and Max and their respective teams was Kyurem, the misshapen creature of ice, rising to his feet, steady for the first time since the beginning of the battle; and above them all, sparks and flame flashed from Reshiram and Zekrom as the spiraled around each other, looking both as if they were attacking each other and desperately trying to aid one another.

"Reshiram can't control himself!" Zekrom's deep but undoubtedly feminine voice shouted down at them all as she and Reshiram continued to wheel through the air. "I can help keep him under control, but only for so long as you can keep my human safe! You-" she was cut off as a plume of flame hit her and knocked her out of her and Reshiram's mutual orbit, though she quickly returned to her place and continued, "You have to stop Kyurem, or at the very least Reshiram's human! Otherwise-"

Zekrom was cut off once again, and didn't attempt to resume her warnings; dealing with Reshiram was nearly too much for her to handle.

So is this how it ends? Cody thought to himself as he stood, fur bristling, not sure what to do. Go for Kyurem again? But not even Lisa was leaping into battle again, not quite yet. He should at least wait for her to lead the charge, as she no doubt would.

But then, something caught his eye. Kyurem was becoming steadier as he stood in the bog, the water barely seeping to the tops of his

feet despite how deeply he sank down. And in direct relation to Kyurem's growing surety was the bristling of the ninetail's fur as she rose to her feet, her glassy eyes trained on the pokémon who once had been her partner.

"Bulbasaur, move!" Cody shouted as he ran towards Bulbasaur, just barely managing to knock the grass type out of the way before a flamethrower hit the mud where he'd previously been standing.

"You want to get yourself killed?" Cody asked Bulbasaur as he got back to his feet and turned to face the ninetails, who had already seemingly forgotten about the two of them as she rapidly neared Emma and Kara. However, before either Cody or Kara needed to do anything, the ninetails was knocked to her side by a combined tackle by Lisa, Ryan, and Isola.

"You can't hurt her! Vulpix is in there, somewhere, she's gotta be!" Bulbasaur shouted, getting to his feet and rushing half of the way to the ninetails before stopping himself abruptly. "Vulpix! Vulpix, you've gotta snap out of it! You can still fight it!"

Cody shook his head. *He's going to get himself killed! Vulpix's fire attacks were strong enough even when she wasn't a mind-controlled monster! If he gets hit…*

A rumbling growl echoed through the air, rippling the waters of the bog. "She is gone," Kyurem said as it lifted one massive foot and took a step forward; rather than sink down this time, the bog froze immediately, giving the monster solid ground. "I can take your soul to the same nothingness, young Bulbasaur. If you-"

A dragonbreath attack suddenly hit Kyurem in the face as Max shouted, "Shut up!"

As Kyurem roared in pain, everyone - even Lisa - looked at Max with a mix of sudden awe and respect. Not just anyone could face a monster many times his size and tell it to shut up, and for the

normally cowardly Max to say such a thing was almost unimaginable.

Trying to get at Bulbasaur, after all he's been through! Max thought. *After killing Alexa, killing Cecil, and taking Vulpix… ! I… I won't let that stand!* For maybe the first time in his life, the fear that Max should've been feeling receded until it was only background noise within his head.

Kyurem turned its yellow eyes to Max. "I shall devour you, all of you," its voice rumbled. "But first…"

It swung its head back to look at the white ninetails it controlled, who immediately got back on her feet and charged towards Emma. The ninetails managed to blast away the electroweb that Kara fired towards her, only to find herself stunned from behind by simultaneous thunderbolts from Ryan and Cody. Another moment, and the ninetails was covered in webs from Kara; but in no time at all, a wave of heat rolled off her body, searing the sticky threads and freeing her once more.

"Don't worry about us!" Ryan shouted over to Team Courage as he charged in towards the ninetails. "Just try to hold off Kyurem as best you can until we can do something about Vulpix!"

Max looked to the rest of his team, and they all nodded to him.

"Right!" Max shouted back. "You can count on us!"

Cody grinned, just a bit. *Since when did Max grow a spine? Whenever it was, it certainly helps us out now.* Cody turned back to the ninetails, but before he could leap in for an attack, Bulbasaur dashed past him.

"I'll bring Vulpix to her senses! Just don't attack!" he said, before flinging himself into the ninetails's path and standing there.

The ninetails immediately shot a flamethrower at him, starting to charge towards Emma once again when Bulbasaur dodged out of the way. Cody and his team quickly moved to join Kara, who was still protection the unconscious deerling. But for now, their defensiveness was unnecessary. Bulbasaur shot out a vine and tripped up the ninetails, sending her tumbling into the bog, her unnatural white fur becoming tainted with the filth.

"Vulpix, you have to remember!" Bulbasaur said. With one vine, he kept her front feet bound; with the other, he'd managed to bind her mouth, preventing her from using any more fire attacks. "It's me, Bulbasaur! Don't you remember? I was one of the first pokémon you met in this world. We formed a team together, we-"

White, mirage-like flames suddenly surrounded the ninetails's body and surged outward in a dragon pulse attack, burning Bulbasaur's vines and giving the ninetails a chance to slip from his grasp. Again, she headed for Emma, firing off an overheat at the deerling's five protectors. A hasty protect by Ryan managed to keep off the worst of it, though a wave of heat still crashed over them.

"Like I'm just waiting for you to talk things out, Bulbasaur!" Lisa suddenly said as, with the protect and overheat now gone, she went in on the offensive, landing a mega punch on the ninetails's leg. The ninetails stumbled, limping slightly now, but managed to turn around and land a close-range fire blast on the wide-open kangaskhan. Lisa fell to her knees as the ninetails ran towards her and pounced, preparing a killing blow in the form of a fire fang attack; but mid-leap, a water pulse from Cody hit her in the side. The attack wasn't strong or very well concentrated, but it knocked her just enough off course to save Lisa.

In another moment, Bulbasaur had leapt atop of the ninetails, holding onto her neck with his vines as she tried to buck him off. She succeeded quickly, his vines too weak from the earlier dragon pulse for him to keep a tight grasp. But he didn't let this stop him for long. Before the ninetails could make another go at Emma, Bulbasaur sent

off a continuous volley of razor leaves sharp enough to cut through even her icy fur and into the skin beneath.

"Vulpix, we fought together! We cried together! You were there to support me after my parents died, and I stood by you even after you kept the truth about you being a human from me for so long!" Bulbasaur shouted at her as the ninetails, head low, turned to face him. Flames were licking out from her mouth, and Bulbasaur's eyes went wide with fear at the sight; no matter how much he wanted to help his friend, he couldn't bite back his terror of the flames. He froze up and, before he could dodge, he was consumed in flames hotter than any he had ever felt, even hotter, it seemed, than the forest fire that had taken his parents' lives.

The fire stopped in just a second when Cody, Isola, and Ryan stepped in, but the damage was already done. Every bit of Bulbasaur's body burned with pain, so much pain that even letting himself sink further into the cold mud and water hurt more than it helped. The little he could think about besides the pain was the terror as it swallowed him up, making him think he was still on fire, still burning, still dying by Vulpix's flame.

"You don't have to do this alone, Bulbasaur!" Ryan said as he and the rest of his team, seeing that Bulbasaur was no longer fit for battle, surrounded the ninetails; even Lisa got to her feet once again, not yet ready to give in despite the massive amount of damage she had taken from the earlier fire blast.

The sound of Ryan's voice shook Bulbasaur from his stupor, and he once again got to his feet, wincing with every movement. He watched as the five of them - Vulpix and Team Misfits - became locked in battle, the four teammates just barely able to keep up with the powerful ninetails's lithe movements and unrivaled attack power. Bulbasaur flinched at every fire attack that was launched, though they weren't aimed at him; far away though the battle was, even the smallest flicker of flame seemed a threat.

For the first time since meeting Vulpix, Bulbasaur found himself afraid not of Vulpix's fire, not of the fact that she was a fire-type. Rather, he was terrified of Vulpix herself. Because if the Vulpix he knew was still there somewhere, she was so far gone that even Bulbasaur could no longer see her within the icy spheres of her eyes. If not for the nine tails that were crinkled and jagged even now, he wouldn't have even guessed that the demon whirling in battle before him had anything at all to do with his partner.

Painfully, Bulbasaur took one step after another, moving ever closer until he stood right on the edge of the battle, his green skin dark from the burns that covered him.

"Vulpix, please," he called out to her, his voice no longer as certain as before. "Please. You've got to be in there, somewhere. You're not the human who gave her soul to Kyurem! You're Vulpix! You know it, and I know it! Just fight it! Go back to being Vulpix, please!"

She didn't so much as pause at the sound of Bulbasaur's voice, nor were any of Cody's attacks rousing her to her usual self, even for a moment. The only thing that Bulbasaur's pleading did was draw her attention to him. And before he could dodge, before any of Team Misfits could help him, her fire blast hit him. He screamed out in pain and terror before collapsing into the mud, unconscious, his breathing shallow and bits of his bulb still smoldering.

I can't even get in an attack! Max thought as he turned his back to Kyurem, shrinking away from the blizzard attack aimed straight at him. Aiden and Kuro dashed in at Kyurem from one side, their jaws ablaze. But Kyurem saw them coming and, cutting off his bizzard, lashed out at them with one of its deformed wings of ice. The two fire types were knocked aside like dolls by the blow. Zeke took the opportunity to fire off a thunderbolt, but the dragon shook off the electricity like it was nothing and shot an ice beam at the luxray. Zeke just barely managed to dodge, the bog where he'd been standing suddenly freezing solid in the intense cold of the attack.

Then Kyurem was roaring in pain, though no attack had landed on it. This had already happened several times throughout the battle, but none of Team Courage had yet been able to figure out the cause. Regardless, they all dashed in together, knowing that this was their chance to attack. Both Kuro and Aiden grabbed onto one of Kyurem's arms, pulling Kyurem halfway to the ground; Zeke aimed a thunderbolt at Kyurem from the opposite side, while Max daringly went in below and aimed upward, his dragonbreath the only attack of Team Courage that seemed to cause Kyurem pain.

In another moment, pure white energy pulsed out from Kyurem's body, throwing all of its attackers backwards into the mud.

Max got to his feet, ready to charge in again as soon as the opportunity. *Kyurem has done too much harm! He killed us humans and dragged us to this world, he's taken control of pokémon, misled others, and now he's threatening this land and everyone in it!* Max looked around and saw his team exhausted, noticed that he himself was trembling with fatigue. But still, he was undiscouraged. *Maybe I'm always like this, getting angry about what's unjust when I don't have any chance at changing things. But for once, I have to try! I have to do everything I possibly can!*

As Kyurem was firing off another blizzard, this time at Aiden and Kuro, it once again was cut off by its own roar of pain, right at the same time Max caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye: the ninetails that Vulpix had become had just been knocked to the ground by a headbutt from Cody.

Kara, who was watching both battles from her spot at Emma's side, apparently noted the coincidence as well. "It's when you humans attack!" she shouted over to Max and the rest of Team Courage. "Whenever one of you hits Vulpix or Kyurem, it hurts the both of them!"

Then we've still got a chance! Max thought as he ran forward once again, this time gathering his dragon energy around his talons, intending to aim for the less ice-covered legs of Kyurem.

But this time, Kyurem recovered quickly. He swung his body around, using his tail to sweep away his attackers, knocking them away; in another moment, he turned on Aiden and Kuro, who were nearest to him, and doused them in the white fires of his dragonbreath attack. He kept up the fires until Max and Zeke desperately fired off their own attacks, trying to draw his attention and help Aiden and Kuro as best they could.

It was too late for Team FireFang, though; neither so much as tried to get up, completely knocked out. Or, at least, Max hoped it was no worse than that. He didn't have time to go over and check. In another moment, the freezing wind and blinding snow of another blizzard attack was flowing into him, so strong that he barely could keep on his feet, no matter how deeply into the muck he dug his claws.

Zeke launched another thunderbolt to draw Kyurem's attention off of Max, but by now, Kyurem had come to expect this. While Max was still trying to extricate himself from the water and mud that had partly frozen around his feet, Kyurem turned and, in a couple steps, was just in front of the luxray.

"Zeke, get out of there!" Max shouted, lacking anything else he could do.

Zeke tried, but fast though he was, he couldn't avoid Kyurem as it swung its head like a club, sending the luxray arching into the air before crashing to the ground at the edge of the Battle Grounds. And, like with Aiden and Kuro, Zeke lay completely still.

At best, he's simply unconscious from all the damage he's taken. At worst… Max didn't even finish the thought. He couldn't. Righteous anger rose up within him, blocking out the truth of what might have happened. He didn't even care that he was now facing Kyurem alone, except in the fact that facing it alone meant Kyurem had already hurt all his allies, already knocked out the pokémon who believed in Max, who had stood by his side for so long now despite the fact that he had always been a coward. The pokémon who had

stood by him, despite the fact that they'd never had any reason to believe that they would be able to count on him when it really mattered.

I'll live up to their belief in me, he resolved, the purple flames of his dragon energy leaking from his beak and sparking from his talons. *I'm not fighting for myself. Not for my sister - she's already dead, and there's nothing I can do about it. And not really for this world, though I want it protected. But I'll fight for them. For my friends, for the pokémon who believed in me even when I didn't deserve it - for them, I won't allow Kyurem to continue on like this!*

"But your fear is still in you, isn't it?" Kyurem said, his voice like a whisper in Max's ears despite its volume. "I can taste it… Taste your determination. Your bravery. But I can taste the fear, too. The smell of it… I will devour it."

"I won't let you!" Max said, the tiny archen boldly staring down the icy beast that towered before him. "I'll defeat you!"

"But can you, really?" Kyurem said. "Wouldn't it be better to give your Spirit to me now, human? No more pain, no fear of failure. Everything will be gone. I can fill your body with power, with my own power. You'll never be afraid-"

"I refuse!" Max shouted. "I don't even care if I die anymore, or if I fail! But I'm not going to run away from this fight!"

He ran forward, unable to hold back the flames that escaped his beak and covered his talons, trailing after him like streamers of purple fireworks. And as he ran, his body glowed and he grew, feathers lengthening, his legs becoming stronger and swifter, his head becoming progressively less birdlike and more reptilian. In a few seconds, he had more than tripled in height, and his body was coursing with power such as he'd never experienced before. Kyurem seemed stunned, or perhaps Max was simply moving too quickly for it to react; everything around him suddenly seemed slow in contrast to his new speed.

When Max opened his wings, it felt like the most natural thing to do; and with a single flap he found himself soaring straight ahead, right towards Kyurem's head.

I won't run away! Not now, not ever again!

Max extended his energy-cloaked talons and struck out at the monster's eyes as his battle with Kyurem began once again.

Cody didn't see Max's evolution, nor did the rest of Team Misfits; it was all they could do to keep up with the Ninetails in front of them, even with all four of them attacking at once.

Determination, Cody thought as he tried to dodge a fire blast, only to get his tail badly burned. *That's what Reshiram said was what made Emma and Vulpix heroes, what made Kyurem seek us out. If I can just have that feeling in myself - if I can make Vulpix remember it, then maybe we can finally end this!*

The ninetails turned her attention to Isola, lashing out at the doduo with a fire fang attack in response to the drill peck that had dug deep into the ninetails's leg. Her fangs latched onto Isola's body, and as Cody ran forward, he saw feathers singeing, blackened down falling to bog below.

Without thinking, Cody leapt onto the ninetails's back, digging his claws into the fur and hanging on for all he was worth as he shouted, "Vulpix, it's us! We can finally stop Kyurem, but you've gotta come back-"

He was thrown to the ground and, in another moment, would've been roasted if not for a sudden electroweb attack that held the ninetails back for just a few seconds.

"If Bulbasaur couldn't get through to her, than no one's going to! Think about it!" Kara shouted at him as she rushed over to his side, as did Isola; Ryan and Lisa were going in on the offensive again.

Isola, ignoring her scorched feathers and skin, said, "Kara, you should stay with Emma in case-"

"If you guys can't hold her back, what am I going to do? Might as well help now," she said. "Anyway, Cody, you've gotta keep on attacking! Every time you or Max land a hit, it hurts Kyurem! If you can break his hold on her, or hurt him enough through her, then we can win this!"

Cody nodded. *In that case, I've just got to keep it up!*

He gathered electricity in his fur, launching the thunderbolt just as soon as Lisa and Ryan had once again withdrawn from the ninetails's onslaught.

The ninetails immediately whirled on him instead, launching the overheat she'd been intending for her previous attackers. Unprepared, both Isola and Cody found themselves caught in the attack, knocked backwards by the sheer power of it as the smell of burnt skin, fur, and feathers joined the stagnant perfumes of the bog around them.

"Cody! Isola!" Ryan shouted out as he ran towards them while Lisa - on the verge of fainting though she was - attacked the ninetails in a flurry of punches and tail hits so intense that the ninetails was forced back.

"Isola, Cody, are you guys okay?" Ryan asked as he made it over, joining Kara at their sides, making the most of Lisa's distraction.

Isola and Cody both shakily got to their feet; Isola in particular seemed barely able to stand, her twiglike legs shaking so much that they seemed on the verge of breaking beneath her weight.

From the battle, there was a slight yell of either surprise or pain, and everyone looked up to see Lisa falling into the mud, the water sizzling off of her badly burned skin.

A transformation seemed to come over the three remaining misfits. All weariness left them, and Isola and Ryan at once rushed forward, barely slowing even to dodge the fire blast that was soon flung towards them. In another moment, the two of them were a blur of feathers and fur as they darted around the ninetails, striking out with talons and beak and tail, withdrawing only momentarily to give the other more room to attack.

Kara shot a look over to Cody before joining the fray herself, spitting out webs precisely to further slow the ninetails as she attempted to deal with her furious attackers. But though anger filled every jagged spike of Cody's fur, every muscle of his zigzagoon body, he didn't move from his spot. Not yet.

I have to feel determined. I have to want this more than anything else - want this fight to be over, want Vulpix to wake up, want Kyurem to be gone. But I don't want any of that all that much.

In spite of everything, a grin came to his face.

You messed with Lisa. So now, I just want to show you that no one messes with any of Team Misfits. Not without consequences. You might look icy, but you're still a fire type - maybe it's time you cooled off!

He didn't feel the pained skin on his face and side, where the overheat had all but vaporized his fur and burned away his skin. Cody focused only on the dampness of his fur, the water around his paws. And, without consciously thinking about it, he let the water in the air and at his feet gather, concentrating it into an orb of perfectly calm liquid just in front of his face. Through the still waters, he saw Kara, Isola, and Ryan fighting on against the ninetails despite the injuries they were accumulating, despite the fatigue that filled them.

The sphere continued to grow, gathering more water into itself, not even a speck of mud tainting it.

"Ryan, Isola, Kara!" Cody shouted when he thought he couldn't hold back the immense pressure trying to surge outward from the globe in front of him.

In his lens of water, he saw all three of his allies turn to look at him for just a second; and then, in a flash of understanding, they leapt back from Ninetails.

Only then, when the icy fox was the only pokémon within the orb of Cody's view, did the Ninetails turn her head and see the zigzagoon. And only then did Cody's grin grow to a full-blown smile.

Lisa, time to finally save your *butt, for once!*

And with that, he spun on one of his forepaws, swinging his tail around and hitting the water pulse forward; the sphere became a solid crescent of water streaking through the air, so fast that the ninetails couldn't dodge. It hit her like a physical blow, bursting against her fur and causing her to stumble back a few steps, nearly falling over.

At first, that seemed like all that had happened. She was still on her feet, and still a ninetails. Nothing of Vulpix flickered into the void of her eyes, not like when Kyurem had begun to lose his control of Cody or Emma.

Yet as those still conscious watched, their bodies as tense as ever, they saw the ninetails slowly begin to change. At first she merely seemed to shrink as the fur went limp, beginning to melt. Then, she actually became smaller little by little as her body changed, once more turning into the familiar body of Vulpix.

But she didn't at once come to her senses. Vulpix stared blankly at Cody in the moment before her eyes closed and her body collapsed beneath her.

Cody didn't run over to see if she was all right. Because only now did he become aware of the roar that was filling his ears, the roar he had

ignored up until now; his determination to defeat Vulpix had been strong enough to block out everything else. But now that he heard the pained roar of Kyurem piercing the air, he turned and started running towards the beast, his eyes trained on the flash of red and blue and yellow that flapped around its head.

"MAX!" Cody shouted, above even the roar. "Now! Attack now!"

Even before Cody shouted out, Max knew what to do. Kyurem had been flagging all battle, his attacks becoming weaker and less precise even before Vulpix had fallen to that last water pulse.

He's lost his control on both Emma and Vulpix now, and it's made him weaker - there will never be a better chance!

Max rose and rose through the air until Kyurem seemed only a speck beneath him and his roar nothing more than a whine. His teammates, who had forced themselves to their feet to fight again alongside their newly evolved team leader, were so small that they were hidden even to his keen eyes. But Max had seen them running from Kyurem as soon as the roaring had started, no doubt putting space between themselves and the rampaging beast. He could only hope that they would be safe, no matter what happened next.

It was only once Kyurem itself disappeared from Max's view that he closed his wings and dove, his body a lance that split the air around him. And as he fell and the dot of Kyurem grew ever larger and the roar ever louder, purple dragon flames leapt to his claws, sparks trailing after him, seemingly burning the air itself.

He kept his wings tucked and his body straight for as long as he could, ignoring how fast the air tore at his feathers, strong enough that he felt it could rip apart his body if he turned the wrong way. Below him, the glow of Kyurem's yellow eyes grew brighter and brighter, and the thrashings of the dragon's body grew more pronounced.

Still, Max didn't spread his new wings to slow himself so that he could aim with better accuracy. He dove and dove until Kyurem was all that filled his vision, and the yellow crown of its head suddenly swung up right into the archeops's path. Only then did Max spread his wings and invert his body, his glowing talons coming down first and hitting the sickly yellow projection at its center, right between the two ill-formed horns of ice. The tips of his talons and the energy coursing through them shattered the spine on impact and dug past skin, into the icy voice of Kyurem itself. Yet even in the absolute cold that he felt rushing out of the void, the flames from his dragon claw licked up around him, combating the cold and darkness with their brilliance and warmth.

And then, all at once, it stopped. There was no more cold around him, no more roar in the air. Max just barely managed to withdraw his talons and soar to the ground some ways away before Kyurem and toppled to the ground, his body as stiff as ice.

In another moment, two more roars filled the air, creating a harmony that was at once both calming and fearsome. Max looked up and saw Reshiram and Zekrom spiraling down around each other, nearing the ground rapidly. He felt all too close to the fallen Kyurem for his own good, so he ran as quickly as his new, longer legs would carry him, reaching his team and the rest of the others right as the space behind him filled with two bright lights. He turned and saw Reshiram and Zekrom spinning through the air just above Kyurem's head, the red and blue of their respective tails glowing so brightly that Max couldn't look at them directly.

Eventually, it grew too bright for him or any of the others to look towards; he covered his face with a wing right as a flash bright enough to penetrate even his feathers flared up. The explosion that followed right after was enough to blow even the largest of them off their feet, heat coursing over them and electricity setting fur and feather alike on end. The concussive sound that accompanied it deafened and disoriented them for minutes after the explosion itself had ended. For a while, they all simple lay there on the ground

where they had fallen; even without the shock of the explosion, they were all exhausted, some barely conscious. And those who weren't conscious were, in some cases, barely alive.

Max was the first to recover, rise to his feet, and look upon what had happened.

In front of them, where Kyurem once had been, only a black crater remained, smoke still rising in little tendrils to join the gray sky above. At the sides of the crater, Reshiram and Zekrom stood like sentinels as the looked upon Max and the other dazed pokémon before them; the two legends seemed triumphant in how they held themselves, yet exhausted as well.

Without so much as acknowledging Reshiram and Zekrom, Max walked over to the edge of the crater, soon followed by the rest of his team as well as Cody, Ryan, and Isola, who by now had picked up the fainted Lisa and put her on her back. As they all looked down into the crater, the saw at the very center a writhing mass of shadow and light, about twice as tall as Max's new, archeops body.

"Emma! You're awake!"

The dumbfounded group turned around to see Kara so happy that sparks were flying off of her as Emma got to her hooves, shaky and confused but otherwise looking better off than everyone else present. She blinked blearily and looked around, her eyes resting for a long time on Reshiram and Zekrom before she turned back to Kara.

"Um… Kara, what exactly…?"

"I'm just so glad you're back to yourself, you big dummy!" Kara practically shouted as everyone, not knowing what else to do, rejoined the deerling and galvantula. "You missed everything because you just *had* to go and get yourself kidnapped! Kyurem got you and took control of you and was using you for the longest time

until we finally managed to beat him and get you free! I even teamed up with that coward of an archen to help get you out of trouble!"

Suddenly becoming aware that Max as well as everyone else was right behind her, she turned to Max and said, "Though really, I guess I can't call you either a coward or an archen anymore, even if you're probably as stupid as ever."

Max smiled, knowing that was as close to a thank you as he'd get from Kara. "You're welcome."

There was a series of loud thumps as Reshiram and Zekrom stepped closer. Emma watched them warily as they neared, and even more warily as Zekrom leaned down and said, "I'm glad you're all right. We haven't had the chance to properly meet - I'm Zekrom, and you're the human who woke me from my sleep. My awakening didn't go quite as either of us would have liked, I'm afraid, but I'm glad to meet you nonetheless."

Emma dipped her head respectfully, her eyes and voice were filled with obvious confusion as she replied, "Likewise? I'm Emma, but… I'm afraid I still have no idea what's going on."

"Well, let me tell you what you've been missing out on," Kara said, pulling Emma aside briefly as she began from Emma's last memory of her capture by Thundurus some months before.

As Kara continued her explanation, a whine rose in Aiden's throat, drawing the rest of the group's attention. While the others had been distracted by the exchange between Zekrom and Emma, the arcanine had made his way over to a little patch of weeds not too far away, to the two limp figures who lay against one another: a scyther with a shattered scythe and a pidgey, with just the tip of one wing dragging in the mud. Both the antler and shard of ice that had impaled the two of them had melted away now; the bodies that were left were dirty and growing stiff, yet somehow, they looked peaceful.

Aiden whined ever louder as Reshiram, Zekrom, and the others came over, all silent at the sight of the fallen pokémon.

"I guess every fight has its casualties," Kuro said consolingly as she walked up to her partner. "Still… I don't think either of them deserved this."

"They just wanted to go back to their own world, so they could be together," Max said, his voice solemn. Then, looking up to Reshiram and Zekrom hopefully, he asked, "Is there any chance they made it? They died once and made it here. Could they have died here and made it back?"

Reshiram and Zekrom exchanged a knowing look, then Reshiram looked back down and shook his head. "I'm sorry I couldn't have stopped this. But they're gone," Reshiram said. "There is a path back to your world now, temporarily, at the very bottom of that crater… But that path was opened well after Cecil and Alexa's Spirits left their bodies. There's nothing Zekrom and I can do for them, except hope that whatever happens to the Spirit after death is more merciful on these two than their lives were."

Everyone was silent for a few moments, heads bowed to Alexa and Cecil.

"You know, Cecil might've done some bad things," Zeke muttered. "But I don't think he deserved this. I don't think either of them deserved this."

Silence once again descended on the group. All of them had gone into this battle knowing the risks they were taking, but the risk of death had never truly sunk in. Not until now, when they were looking at it in the face.

Cody's ears suddenly lifted upwards attentively, and he turned his head to see movement near the reeds some ways away. Bulbasaur was awake again, alive despite how badly burned his entire body was, and Cody could just barely hear him calling his partner's name

as he shook her. Yet, as far as he could tell, her body was completely limp.

Without quite realizing it, he felt a tear trickle down his cheek. He took a couple of steps in Bulbasaur's direction and, faintly, he asked, "And what about Vulpix? We killed Kyurem, so she'll be okay now. Right, Reshiram?"

Everyone glanced at where Cody was looking, then up to Reshiram.

Reshiram seemed about to respond, but Zekrom suddenly put one of her massive hands on his shoulder. "Reshiram, that can wait. The humans don't have much time."

"What do you mean, we don't have much time?" Emma asked as she and Kara rejoined the group. Despite all that had no doubt just been explained to her, she seemed to be handling herself well; yet there was a quivering to her eyes that belied the certainty of her voice, and her frequent glances down at Cecil and Alexa showed that she was more shaken than she let on.

"I mean that you don't have much time, if you want to return to your own worlds," Zekrom said, turning her head to look at the crater. "Like Reshiram said, there is a distortion at the center of that crater. It was caused by the last mixing of our powers and the power of Kyurem, which seems to have been too great a strain on the fabric of space in that spot. However, the tear in space is shrinking with every passing moment as balance begins to return to Reshiram and I. You need not leave this world if you wish to stay, but if you do not go now, you'll never be able to return to your human lives."

"And you know it'll get us back to our lives?" Cody asked cautiously, looking straight at Zekrom and Reshiram. He didn't dare look over at Ryan, or Isola, or at the unconscious Lisa draped on Isola's back. "I mean… I died when I was a human. I remember that. If I just go back to my body somehow, won't I just freeze to death again?"

"I assure you, you will be fine," Reshiram said. "Zekrom and I both sense that you will survive. Your deaths were unnatural, as was your travel through space and time to get here; your Spirits returning will set things right again. Perhaps your Spirits will return to the time before Kyurem influenced your deaths; or if not, you will undoubtedly find yourself able to escape the situations you found yourselves in. You made it here, to a place where you didn't even have a body to begin with. With the path now open, you will be sure to survive your journey and revival back in your own world. But you must choose now - you have only minutes before the tear in our world closes itself."

No one spoke immediately. Max looked to Zeke; Emma cast her gaze around to everyone before her eyes finally fell to Kara; Cody continued to look obstinately down at the ground.

"Max, I stand by what was said before, back at the Northern Guild," Zeke said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Whatever you choose is fine, but… If you go… I guess, what I mean to say is that I've changed in more ways than just evolution thanks to having you around. I won't forget that, or everything we went through."

"Same from us, though we weren't with you quite as long," Kuro chimed in, her voice strong and confident even though her own feelings were just as audible. "Whatever you choose-"

"We'll miss you!" Aiden said, his tail and ears drooping sadly; he wasn't nearly as subtle about his feelings as his partner. "I really don't want you to go! But… but it *is* your choice… but…"

"Oi, Max!" Kara said from her place still at Emma's side. "I might miss ya' if you go, just so you know. Just a little. Like, a joltik-sized little teensy bit."

Max felt tears welling up in his eyes and dripping down the side of his scaly face. And, as he looked around at the rest of Team Courage, he found himself laughing. Seeing their questioning faces, he said, "It's just- you all look so different now that I'm not so much

smaller! It's funny!" He broke down into laughter, not entirely knowing why.

Zeke and Aiden joined in soon, though Kuro and Kara remained more confused than anything until the laughter finally subsided. And Max, finally getting a hold of himself and sobering up, said, "Guess I've changed, too. Other than the fact that I'm bigger now. I'm different now, and I've got you guys to thank for that. But… But I think that's why I've got to go home. I've done my bit here, and the stuff that was holding me back as a human won't hold me back any longer. I want to do what I can now, in the world I truly belong in."

"Then you'd best hurry," Reshiram said, looking off towards the crater. "The tear is shrinking fast, and you're larger than you once were."

Max smiled and nodded to his friends, and then to all the others gathered round. "Well, guess this is goodbye. Glad to have met you. All of you." Then, turning, he opened his wings. "Might as well use these things one last time!"

He didn't wait for any more goodbyes, or any more tears. With a genuine smile still on his face, he ran up to the edge of the crater and jumped, flapping up just a bit before speeding down, swooping towards the center of the pit.

Zeke, Aiden, and Kuro all ran up to the edge of the crater, but by the time they reached it, Max had already disappeared into the storm of shadows and light at its deepest point.

The slightest of sniffles escaped from Zeke, though like Max, he was smiling. "Stupid bird."

Aiden was too put out to respond, but Kuro smiled back to Zeke.

The others soon joined the trio at the edge of the pit and, after a moment looking down at its depths, Emma spoke up. "Kara, I know you came all this way just to save me, but-"

"Ah, don't worry, I know already," Kara said, not seeming the least bit put off. "Haven't talked to you for, like, months anyway, so it's not like you leaving now is gonna be any different. I mean, really, I didn't even think we'd ever be able to save you from Kyurem, period. Glad I could help with that much at least."

Emma's ears drooped down ever so slightly. "Not going to miss me at all?"

"Now whoever said that?" Kara asked, and Emma at once brightened up, her brown fur even looking more vibrant. "But I think you've got your own stuff to do, and you're certainly not going to manage any of that big stuff stuck around in Sheltered Vale with me."

Emma nodded. "Before I leave, promise me one thing."

"Yeah?" Kara asked.

" *Don't* stay stuck in Sheltered Vale. Because you've got bigger things to do, too."

Kara laughed. "All right, you crazy deerling, it's a promise! But only if you promise that we'll meet again someday!"

Emma blinked dumbly for a moment, then smiled. "I'll make it happen. Somehow. So I guess that makes this just a temporary goodbye."

"Let's not even bother with the goodbyes if it's not permanent. Just get yourself out of here and find me first thing when you make it back!"

Glancing around at everyone, Emma said, "Well, I guess that settles that. I'll be off, but maybe I'll see all of you again someday!"

She stepped off the edge and began to slide down the crater wall. But just before she could step into the quickly shrinking portal, Cody

jumped off the ledge after her and started sliding down himself, shouting for her to wait.

Emma turned and looked at him in confusion, while Ryan and Isola watched their teammate getting farther away from them, both too shocked for words. And they did nothing as Cody got closer and closer to Emma, and ever closer to the portal itself, his one-way trip away from Team Misfits.

He was just in front of the portal saying something to Emma when Isola suddenly lowered Lisa to the ground, then jumped off the ledge and into the crater herself, new vigor filling her limbs.

"Cody!" she shouted, moving as fast as her long legs would carry her. "Cody, please, just wait! Don't go!"

Cody glanced back at her, then looked to Emma once more; the deerling nodded before vanishing among the shadows and light that were now barely larger than her own small body.

And then, smiling, Cody turned to Isola and, shouting for her and everyone else to hear, he said, "What? You didn't think I was actually going to leave before I could brag to Lisa about saving her butt, did you?"

Tears in her eyes, Isola jerked to a stop just in front of her, barely keeping herself from tumbling into the portal. "Wh-what?" she asked uncomprehendingly.

With a playful hop, he managed to scramble onto Isola's back. "I'm not leaving. I just had to tell Emma… Well, Emma comes from my world's future. Or so we thought when we first met. If that's true, then I want her to find my family. Let them know that I'm all right. I told her what to tell them so they'd know it was really me. By the time she's alive, I think they'd be glad to hear it. That I didn't just die back then."

"So you're not… You're not going to leave? To go back to your family?" Isola asked, twisting her head back to look at Cody.

He shook his head, then affectionately touched his nose to the tip of Isola's beak. "What, are you joking? Love 'em to death, but they did what they could for me. My parents raised me, and my little siblings were there for me to be strong for. But my parents will move on, and my siblings are strong enough that they don't need me anymore - I think I'll stay in the world where I've got a new family to look out for, and to look out for me." Then, shouting up so that Ryan could hear as well, he said, "So I'm definitely staying, even if you guys are the most ridiculous bunch of misfits I've ever met!"

"I heard that, you dummy!" Ryan shouted back down, surreptitiously wiping away a tear with his bushy tail.

With Cody still on her back, Isola moved towards the rim of the crater, her strong legs and talons pulling them up and up until, once again, they had rejoined the other pokémon. There, they saw that Lisa was finally starting to sit up, exhausted as ever but finally conscious again.

"So I guess we won, huh?" she asked as she looked around.

"Suppose so," Cody said as he jumped down from Isola's back. "No thanks to you - if it weren't for me, Vulpix'd still be…" Cody trailed off, realizing who he was talking about.

Reshiram, hearing the comment, spoke up once again. "There's one more matter that must be attended to." Without any further explanation, Reshiram walked past them and over to Bulbasaur, his long strides clearing the distance in just a couple steps. Cody and the others followed pensively, becoming terribly conscious of the sobs they could hear coming from Bulbasaur the closer they got.

Reshiram towered over Bulbasaur for a few minutes, listening to the sobbing grass type; no one dared to say a word, their eyes locked on the motionless figure that Bulbasaur held in his vines. It felt like an eternity that they stood there, but eventually, Bulbasaur looked up and realized that Reshiram was next to him.

Straining his neck to look Reshiram in the eyes, Bulbasaur tried to say something, but was barely able to speak past the knot in his throat. He broke into a more solid stream of tears, the drops of water falling onto Vulpix's matted fur, making the mud that covered her stickier than ever. Reshiram waited patiently, not saying a word.

It took Bulbasaur a couple more tries, but soon enough, he managed to choke out, "Reshiram. Reshiram, she's not moving. She's breathing and I can feel her heartbeat, but she's cold and she won't wake up. Just… Just… What's wrong? Make her wake up! This is your fault, after all! She wouldn't have even ended up in this world if it wasn't for you!" Once again, Bulbasaur collapsed against Vulpix's side, unable to speak past the sobs.

Again, Reshiram waited patiently until Bulbasaur had calmed somewhat. And then, he said, "The moment Kyurem finally took hold of her, her Spirit should have been consumed. Her body would have died then. By all rights, you would've been talking to a corpse the entire time she was a ninetails. And yet, her body still lives. Her Spirit… I cannot say for sure what has happened to it. It may be gone forever, and her body is holding onto life only through the sheer force of what was once her will."

"Her Spirit may be gone, but what if it's not!?" Bulbasaur shouted back up at the legend. "What if it's still somewhere? I can't just abandon her! I won't! How do I get her back?"

Reshiram shook his head. "I do not know. I cannot sense her Spirit at all… I do not think it still survives. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

Bulbasaur looked up at Reshiram with disbelief. "No," he whispered. "No. No. You're lying! There has to be something I can do! She's still there, somewhere, otherwise she'd be dead! But she's not! Please, there's something, I just know there is! Don't lie to me!"

Zekrom stepped up to Reshiram's side. "There is one thing - one pokémon who knows of the Spirit better than either of us, one

pokémon who may be able to divine what has happened to your friend's Spirit."

"Tell me!" Bulbasaur shouted up as Reshiram turned his head to Zekrom in surprise. "Who is it? Who do I have to ask? I don't care if it's the most terrifying pokémon ever, I'll make them tell me how to get Vulpix back!"

"That's not the issue here," Reshiram said as he glared at Zekrom. "Zekrom is giving you false hope. We have not so much as sensed the presence of this pokémon for ages upon ages-"

"-but that doesn't mean she is dead, Reshiram," Zekrom said. Then, looking down at Bulbasaur, Zekrom said, "I may indeed be giving you false hope. But we never found proof of this pokémon's death, and so my own hope still lives on. As, I believe, does your own hope for your friend. Am I correct?"

"Yes!" Bulbasaur said. "I know I can get her back, and I'll do whatever it takes!"

Zekrom nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Then I ask you to be patient, for just a while longer. We must bury the two humans who died here - they deserve at least that much for their efforts. And you must give yourself time to heal. Then, once you have recovered, Reshiram and I will tell you of your goal."

Reshiram met Zekrom's gaze and, with a relenting sigh, he nodded. "Yes, only then will we tell you of Meloetta. And only then can your quest for the rebirth of your partner's Spirit commence."

THIS IS NOT THE END. As you can probably tell. So, lengthy author's note ahead, hope you're ready for this:

First off, I'm not sure how this chapter turned out, let me know how you liked it or didn't! I've just been so strapped for time lately that it felt more rushed than I would've liked it to have been. But POOR

BULBASAUR. Emma and Max and Cody got their relatively happy endings, and at least Alexa and Cecil died together…

Secondly, as I said, this is not the end. Since before I started writing, I wanted to set up the plot of this like Explorers of Time/Darkness/Sky, with the main plot followed by an extremely relevant post-completion continuation of the plot. And thanks to those last couple lines, you now have the hint as to what these final few chapters will be about.

HOWEVER, I won't be writing the last few chapters right away, sadly. My friends are essentially forcing me to attempt National Novel Writing Month (write a novel of 50,000 words or more in the month of November), which leaves no time for any extra writing (as I found out last year). I don't even have a good plot together, but… We'll see. I may cut off my attempt early, in which case I'll get back to getting chapters of this out as soon as possible. If not, you probably won't see more of this until early December at the earliest, and mid December (after I'm done with finals) at the latest. However, I did make sure to at least get to this point, so we at least get resolution to what you might call the "main story" of the fanfic, before the credits roll. I'll try to keep my "chapter update" section of my profile relatively up-to-date with any news about my NaNoWriMo plans and this fics plans, so if you're dying to know what's up, just check in there periodically.

Last, but certainly not least, this seems like a great moment to thank you all. Compared even to "The Language of Life," this story has been hugely successful, at least based on my stats page. Always over 120 readers of new chapters the week they're released, over 200 in two weeks after a chapter is released… Nearing 400 reviews, a lot of people have it on their alerts and favorites list… And, most importantly, I've gotten some great feedback from everyone, both of the super-motivational-supportive variety and the genuinely awesome criticism variety. Really, I can't possibly express how much it means to me. I apologize that I haven't been living up to my weekly standards lately; and yet even despite that, I don't think I ever get

any complaints. Or those I do just make me feel good, because it's people just anxious to read more. I can't thank you all enough. I just hope that, when I do get to them, these last few chapters round out the story in a way that you all enjoy!

Chapter 37: Searching for Song

Author's Note: Just fair warning, there are some major PMD Sky/Darkness/Time spoilers in this chapter. On the off chance that someone reading this fic hasn't played those games… You have been warned. Just stop when you get to a certain pokémon asking to tell a story.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Searching for Song

Cody quickly hurried off of Reshiram, using the giant's outstretched wing like a ramp; and upon reach the sand of the beach where they'd landed, he shook his fur out as close to its normal, spiky style as he could. He didn't much like the feel of windblown fur sticking against him. Lisa, Ryan, and Isola leapt down to the ground just behind them, Isola electing to jump down rather than risk hurting Reshiram's wing with the combined weight of herself and the limp vulpix carried on her back. Though in reality, Cody doubted that even their combined weight could do much to such a pokémon, even on the relatively fragile structure of a wing.

Being not the most agile of pokémon, Bulbasaur came down from Reshiram's back more slowly, though a nervous energy still filled his movements; he could barely take his eyes off of Reshiram and Zekrom despite the tricky terrain of the massive snow-white plumage beneath his feet.

I'm amazed he's even moving right now, Cody thought to himself, glancing casually over at the bulbasaur, taking special note of the blotchy patterns of dark and light caused by the burns he'd sustained in his battle. *But I've only seen him flinch once or twice. He's got to still be in pain, it's only been two weeks and even a grass type needs more time to heal… But he's doing a great job of hiding it if he's still hurting a lot.*

"So Reshiram, Zekrom, why are we here?" Bulbasaur spoke up as he stepped up to the edge of the shore they had landed upon, looking south as the late morning sun glinted off of the water. He stepped back quickly, though, when the water lapped at his feet.

Guess salt water on burns isn't too pleasant a feeling, no matter how strong he wants to seem.

If Reshiram and Zekrom noticed his discomfort, neither mentioned it. "We are here because, if you wish to have even the slightest chance at saving your friend, you must find a pokémon named Meloetta," Reshiram said. "But I cannot emphasize enough how unlikely this is to work. I still cannot so much as sense Vulpix's spirit, and she is my own hero, the only being in this world who was able to wake me from my slumber. Even if Meloetta can help Vulpix, the chances of you finding her are very small; Zekrom and I have searched for her for millennia, but we cannot feel her spirit anywhere. I'm afraid she must be dead, or perhaps-"

"Be more optimistic, Reshiram," Zekrom interrupted, looking down at Bulbasaur. "Surely you don't think she could have died without us feeling it?"

Reshiram shook his head. "I don't know anymore what to think. Why else would she abandon us for so long? How else could she allow all of this to have happened?"

"Oi, 'scuse me," Lisa shouted up, her voice as loud and obnoxious as possible. "Anyone mind telling us just who this Meloetta is?"

Reshiram looked at the tiny pokémon wordlessly, annoyance filtering through his usually impassive face.

Well, Reshiram's clearly not in a good mood, Cody thought with a smirk, before quickly sobering up. *I suppose now's not the time to be laughing, though. Not if Reshiram is this concerned about things.*

Seeing that her opposite wasn't planning on speaking up, Zekrom said, "Back when Reshiram and I were the perfect whole of Rem, our power was greater than even our current powers combined. But because we had so much power embodied in one being, and because the entirety of the land was under our care, we needed an external force to give us direction and control. That force was Meloetta. She was a strong pokémon in her own right, but her true power lay in her voice. Though we embodied the Spirit of the land, she understood the true essence of it and moderated it through her song, a song that sometimes changed from one day to the next and that sometimes would continue without variation for decades."

"No matter how the melody changed, it was always the most beautiful sound to grace our ears," Reshiram said with a sigh.

Zekrom shifted, lifting her head and looking out across the ocean. "She lived on Melodic Isle far to the south, beyond our reach. Rarely did we ever get to see her, but we always heard her; her song drifted on the warm south winds and filled the land, too soft for all but the most keen of Spirits to hear." Zekrom ceased speaking as she continued to gaze over the ocean, lost in thought.

"Then she simply disappeared," Reshiram said, taking up the story. "The song stopped. The 'we' that was Rem fell into chaos before finally fragmenting, splitting into Zekrom and I in order to balance each other. And, of course, Kyurem emerged as an unintended result. That's how we coped with Meloetta's disappearance. Zekrom and I will never be able to be one again, though the presences of Emma and Vulpix have made us fuller. But to be truly stable, so that nothing of Kyurem's nature happens again, we need Meloetta to return, or some other being like her."

"So you have no idea what happened to her?" Isola asked.

"None whatsoever," Reshiram says. "We cannot even leave the main body of this land, so we could not check on her. Nor did we see a dire need to seek her out. After all, we had no knowledge of Kyurem,

and we seemed to be handling things well enough. We suspected that she would eventually return of her own accord."

"So you think this Meloetta can really help out Vulpix?" Bulbasaur asked hopefully, his eyes darting back to the limp figure sprawled on Isola's back.

Reshiram hesitated, but Zekrom nodded. "I believe so. If Meloetta is still on her island and you bring Vulpix to that place, I think there is a chance to save your friend, if her Spirit still survives."

"You are too optimistic, Zekrom," Reshiram said. "The proof is clear: I can sense neither Meloetta's nor Vulpix's Spirits. Bulbasaur, I'm sorry, but this is a fool's errand and-"

"And you are too realistic, Reshiram. Hope is not a bad thing," Zekrom countered. "But even if my hopes are unfounded, you cannot deny Bulbasaur even the slightest chance that Vulpix might be saved. Bulbasaur, I do believe that you are not dissuaded, though the chance of saving Vulpix is small?"

Bulbasaur nodded. "Right. I'll do whatever it takes."

"And we'll help out however we can, too," Cody spoke up, looking over at Bulbasaur with an encouraging smile. "After all, she's the only human left here aside from me. I want to help her out if I can."

"But you know, speaking of us helping out," Ryan said, "I've got a bit of a question before we try to find this Meloetta. So… What's the rush? Bulbasaur's barely healed, and-"

"I'm fine, really!" Bulbasaur interrupted. "I just want Vulpix back."

Ryan flicked an ear dismissively. "Yeah, we know, we know. But even if you can move and fight, you're not at your best for a trip like this. Just wait another week and you'd be way better off. And Reshiram and Zekrom, you guys didn't seem like we were in a rush

a couple weeks ago, since Vulpix is stable and all. So why bring us here now?"

"Because things have changed," Reshiram said. "The portal to the other worlds that opened upon Kyurem's defeat is closed, but the distortion still lingers. So far, our efforts to eliminate it have done nothing. Moreover, it seems to be growing and becoming more unstable; we don't know what it will do, especially if it grows past the bounds of its crater. If Meloetta still lives, we may be in need of her power if something goes wrong with the distortion. And speaking of the distortion…"

Reshiram looked over to Zekrom, and Zekrom nodded. "We must be going," Zekrom said. "We cannot risk spending too much time away from it, in case something does happen. Please, do what you can to find Meloetta - for your own sake as much as for ours."

Reshiram spread his wings, and both pokémon's tails began to glow as they prepared to take flight.

"But wait! How are we supposed to get to Meloetta's island?" Bulbasaur called before they could leave.

"As we said, we can go no farther south than this," Zekrom replied. "However, we have spoken with the Guildmasters, and Elgyem seemed to know of someone who would get you there. He should meet you here midday; the island is due south of this exact point. I wish you luck in your search, and in Vulpix's revival."

With that, Zekrom took off, but Reshiram lingered just a moment longer.

"Bulbasaur, there's just one thing I want to say. The night that you and Vulpix finally brought me to my senses, Vulpix came and spoke with me. She was prepared to do whatever it took to fight Kyurem. And… she would not actually say it aloud to me, but I sensed that she knew she would be consumed by Kyurem. But for you, and for this world, she nonetheless took that risk. If this quest is for naught,

and you either are unable to find Meloetta or she is unable to help, then don't let her sacrifice be in vain."

Bulbasaur scowled. "What do you mean? The world is safe, so her sacrifice can't be in vain."

"But she saved the world for *you*, Bulbasaur," Reshiram said. "If you can't move on, then-"

"I won't have to move on - I'm going to get her back!" Bulbasaur interrupted.

For a moment, Reshiram was stunned at the sudden outburst. Then, with one final, sad look back at Bulbasaur, he leapt into the air, following Zekrom northward.

No one quite knew what to say. Bulbasaur still seemed upset, his front feet digging into the ground and his eyes perhaps a bit wetter than normal; and up until now, Ryan, Cody, and Isola hadn't realized that Bulbasaur had any sorrow beneath his optimistic determination.

Although, I guess that's only natural. He's been hiding the pain of what happened to Vulpix, just like he's hiding the tenderness of his burns.

As usual, though, Lisa was completely ignorant of the tension in the air. "So when do you think this pokémon's gonna come, huh? The one who's supposed to take us to Meloetta's island?"

"Hopefully soon!" Bulbasaur said, doing his best to return to his earlier enthusiasm as he looked out at the sea. "The sooner he comes, the sooner we can help Vulpix."

"Got that right," Lisa said. "So, anyone wanna battle? Gotta stay ready for anything. I mean, what if this Meloetta wants a battle before she'll help us? I hope she does. I didn't get nearly my fair share of butt-kicking during that battle with Kyurem."

Cody looked over at Isola and Ryan doubtfully. *Stupid Lisa… Now is* not *the time for a battle. I feel like we ought to talk to Bulbasaur, but… What do we say? Tell him that Reshiram's wrong, and that we'll definitely get Vulpix back to her usual self? Or- I just don't know! I'm not good with this sort of stuff…*

"I'm up for a battle," Bulbasaur said, stretching his short legs a bit in preparation.

"All right!" Lisa shouted, while at the same time Ryan said, "No, no way Bulbasaur's battling."

"Oh, come on, don't be a spoil-sport, Ryan," Lisa said.

"Bulbasaur, you ought to be resting. Or keep Vulpix company or something," Ryan said, casting a look over at the limp vulpix still laying on Isola's back. "If you've really gotta battle, Lisa, then I'm up for it."

Lisa grumbled a bit, but eventually said, "Fine, fine. So long as I get to kick someone's butt, I'll be happy."

The two quickly departed a ways and started up their battle, leaving Bulbasaur, Cody, and Isola looking at each other, all just as speechless as before.

"Um, well…" Bulbasaur eventually started. "Isola, should we take Vulpix off your back? She wouldn't want to be a burden, so long as we're just waiting around."

"I barely even know she's there," Isola said as she gently lowered herself to the ground, "but if you want to, go ahead. I bet she'd enjoy the feeling of the sand."

That's such a weird way to put things. Vulpix won't care one way or another. She's essentially in a coma, for crying out loud. Can't feel a thing out here, I bet. Bulbasaur is probably offended by you saying things like that, Isola, or-

"Thanks," Bulbasaur said as he used his vines to ease Vulpix onto the sand next to Isola. Then, he settled down in front of Vulpix a ways and just sat there, watching the rise and fall of her body with such an intensity that he looked like he was trying to will her to wake up right there and then.

Not knowing what else to do, Cody looked at Vulpix, too. And, feeling more awkward by the second, he tried to start conversation again. "It's hard to tell anything is even wrong, huh?" he said, shuffling his feet nervously. "Just looks like she's asleep."

"She might as well be," Bulbasaur said with a slight smile. "I mean, we'll be waking her up soon enough, so it's just like a long nap. Nothing more than that."

Cody and Isola exchanged an anxious glance. *I mean, it's good to be confident, but if he keeps this attitude up and then we can't find Meloetta, I don't like to think what sort of state he'll be in.*

Obviously thinking along much the same lines, Isola said in her usual, quiet voice, "But Bulbasaur, what if we can't help her?"

"Don't say that," he said grimly, the claws on his feet digging into the sand as his whole body tensed. "She'll be fine."

"We're going to do everything we can to help her," Isola reassured. "But… Well, think of it this way. I think Reshiram was right that Vulpix wouldn't want you obsessing over her. And what if Meloetta isn't on her island, and we have to look for her somewhere else? If this drags on for a week, or a month, or years, is this what you're going to spend your spare moments doing? Just looking at her? Not enjoying the world she saved?"

Bulbasaur lifted his head and looked around him, as if seeing the pristine coast and glistening ocean for the first time. Then he laid his head back down, looking at Vulpix once again.

"We're going to save her, and it's going to be soon," he said in answer. "I don't need to think about stuff like that."

Isola frowned, and looked to Cody for aid.

Cody hesitated for a moment more and then, not knowing what else to say, started with, "But you *do* need to think about stuff like that, because even Zekrom was saying that this probably won't work, even if she wants to believe it will. Vulpix might be gone, and-"

"Just shut up! She's not gone, she's right here!" Bulbasaur said, suddenly jumping to his feet and facing down Cody.

Well excuse me! Cody thought, his fur bristling. "No, she's not right here, and you know it! Not really, not the important part at least! Bulbasaur, we just don't want you-"

"I told you to shut up!" Bulbasaur shouted again, taking a step towards Cody. "She's going to be fine! I'm going to make sure of it!"

"And all I'm saying is that you can't know that for sure, okay? Just chill!" Cody said. "Right now, you sound insane, and me and Isola are just trying to make you see reason! Like Isola said, what if this does go on for a year, or even longer? Are you just going to keep talking about Vulpix like she's just sleeping?"

"She *is* just sleeping!" Bulbasaur's eyes shimmered, filled with angry tears.

"And I say she's not! Someone who's sleeping can wake up on her own, and she sure isn't doing that anytime soon, by the looks of it!" Cody yelled right back. Even as he the words came out of his mouth, he regretted them; even by *his* standards, he felt like he was being an absolute jerk. *But what if Vulpix really doesn't come to? It's better if Bulbasaur acknowledges that she might be gone now, while he still has hope to console him! If we never find Meloetta or she can't help Vulpix, and Bulbasaur only realizes that Vulpix is gone then… I*

mean, he's already half mad now! I don't want him going completely insane!

Rather than respond, Bulbasaur launched himself forward, tackling Cody and sending them both tumbling into the shallow waves.

"Hey! Get off!" Cody sputtered through the water as he pushed Bulbasaur off of him, launching him farther out towards the ocean. Cody almost regretted it; Bulbasaur was so low to the ground that he doubted he could swim. But the water was just shallow enough for Bulbasaur to touch the ground and once again leap forward in a tackle attack, this time with vines outstretched as well. He knocked Cody off his feet again and, once the zigzagoon was pinned beneath him, he used his vines to hold his forelegs down, keeping him from righting himself.

"Take it back!" Bulbasaur shouted in Cody's face. "Vulpix is fine, all right? She's fine!"

A wave washed over Cody's face, and he struggled to cough up the brine, Bulbasaur still refusing to let him off his back despite the fact that he was practically choking.

Isola approached the two. She seemed ready to jump into the fight if need be, but for now, she still held herself back and, in a firm voice, said, "Bulbasaur, that's enough. Cody may not be nice about it, but he's trying to help you in his own way."

"Then just admit that I'm right, and Vulpix will be fine!" Bulbasaur yelled again as another wave washed past.

"All right?" Cody gasped out between coughs. "You're absolutely crazy! Just let me up already!" *Yeah, like he's going to do that!* Rather than wait for the next denial, Cody let out a thunderbolt, the electricity traveling straight from Cody's fur into the already soaked body of Bulbasaur.

However, Cody hadn't taken into account that the most recent wave had yet to fully receded; the electricity arced through the nearby current, eventually making its way to Isola.

Isola let out a little gasp of surprise, though the indirectness of the thunderbolt made it only painful and not particularly damaging. For Bulbasaur, his type managed to keep the damage low, though the force of the lightning stunned him long enough for Cody to throw off the vines and get to his feet again.

It took him only a moment to look over at the wincing doduo and realize that he'd managed to hit her, too, and his fur prickled more than ever.

"And look what you made me do now!" Cody said as he headbutted Bulbasaur back into the waves. "Just because you're being stupid! We're trying to *help* you, idiot, or else we wouldn't be here!"

Bulbasaur didn't shout anything back while Cody waited expectantly, ready to shout back in return. It took him a couple seconds to realize that the reason for Bulbasaur's silence was that this time, he really *had* been thrown out into water above his head. What was worse was that the Bulbasaur couldn't even stay remotely afloat, his head only popping up momentarily before he sunk back down to the bottom, where he'd once again leap up to the surface.

And worst of all, the current was rapidly pulling him further and further away from shore

"Cody, he's drowning!" Isola said as she suddenly dashed past him, her thin, long legs easily cutting through the water. She went out as far as she could until her brown feathers grazed the waves, and there she stretched out her neck, opening her beak and very nearly grasping one of the vines stretching blindly above the surface of the water.

But then, a wave hit her and she lost her balance, tumbling backward into the water with an ungainly squawk. She desperately

scrambled to regain her footing, but the same current that had Bulbasaur in its grasp now firmly had a hold of her.

"Isola!" Cody shouted out, nervously running out as far into the sea as he could, despite the now obvious danger. However, despite his desperation, he went no farther. *I can swim, sure, but I wouldn't have a chance against a current like this!*

Isola managed to get her footing ever so briefly, after she'd already been carried out to well up her neck. "Get Ryan!" she shouted just before the current caught a hold of her feathered body once again and brought her further out to sea.

Ryan… Ryan, right! He knows surf, so he can swim to them! In a panic, Cody turned and dashed off towards where Lisa and Ryan were having their battle, completely oblivious to the two drowning pokémon. It didn't help that their battle had carried them quite a ways away from their starting position; Cody wondered if the two could even hear him as he shouted, "Ryan! Ryan, get over here!"

The minccino didn't react at first, instead keeping all his focus on Lisa as she charged.

He can't hear me over the sound of the waves! "RYAN!"

Ryan dodged a fire punch from Lisa, then lifted his head to see what was the matter.

"Isola and Bulbasaur are out there!" Cody said as he stopped and gestured dramatically towards the sea, hoping that at least he would get the point even if he couldn't hear the words over ocean.

There was a moment of confusion. Then, Ryan's ears pinned themselves backwards as he suddenly dashed towards the ocean, in the direction Cody was pointing.

"No, further this way!" Cody shouted as he ran back towards where he'd come from. This time, there was a lull in the waves that let his

voice carry with surprising strength, allowing Ryan to hear him. Cody was glad for the lull at first, but it was only then that he realized that it was suddenly too quiet; the waves had stopped crashing against the shore altogether.

Cody continued to run forward out of desperation, but as he did so he finally really looked and saw that the water ahead of him seemed to be bulging. It was hard just to say how tall the mounting wave was with no frame of reference along the horizon to judge by, but it seemed completely unnatural compared to the gentle waves that had been washing the shore up until now.

He and Ryan kept on running despite the approaching wave. *It doesn't seem that big. Maybe three times as high as me? I've just gotta save Isola, and Bulbasaur too I guess, so it doesn't matter!*

They got closer, and Ryan suddenly fell back; Cody could hear him shouting at him to do the same. *Okay, five times as high. But if Isola is still out there, I've gotta do something!*

It was only when he got to the much receded waterline that he finally pulled up short, for a moment held in place in awe of the wall of water that was cresting not at three nor five, but at easily ten times his own height.

And in that wave, he saw the flash of a beak break out somewhere just in front of him.

Isola!

Bulbasaur completely forgotten, Cody leapt at where he'd seen the doduo. He was already mid jump when a thought finally occurred to him:

And how the hell is this going to help?

But it was already too late, and the wave of water hit him like a ton of bricks. Flecks of light danced in his darkened vision and he tried to

recapture his lost breath, only to feel his lungs fill with water. He tried to think back to the last time this happened, to think of what to do. *Dear God, why do I even have experience with something like this? A guy should only have to live through this sort of thing once! But back then-*

Cody opened his eyes and tried to look for the light of the surface, but already the wave was breaking apart around him as he felt himself falling, and in another moment he crashed down into the sand, brought back up onto shore. He blacked out momentarily, but his unconscious coughing brought him back to his senses.

"Are you all alright?" Cody heard a vaguely familiar voice calling out from the direction of the ocean. "I saw someone drowning, and didn't think I could make it in time, so I used a surf attack to get you all to shore. Is there anyone else missing?"

"Nope, this is everyone," Cody heard Lisa saying. "Thanks for saving all these idiots, by the way." Eventually, Cody opened his eyes, trying to chase the blackness away from the edges of his vision.

The entire beach was predictably soaked, and scattered about were those who had been caught up in the wave. Both Isola and Bulbasaur were still coughing up copious amounts of saltwater, but other than that, they seemed only shaken by their near drowning. Ryan, who was wet but seemed to have missed the full force of the wave, was standing at Bulbasaur's side, who was by far the worst off. And Lisa, meanwhile, was looking on with her usual smugness, standing next to the source of the familiar voice.

"Lapras?" Cody asked aloud, though the water-type was too far away to hear him. But now wasn't the time to ask Lapras why he was here; Cody shook some of the excess water from his sodden fur and hurried over to Isola's side.

"Isola, are you all right?" Cody asked, standing around nervously. *Oh, shoot, what do you do when someone nearly drowns? I've been away from the human world for so long… Mouth to mouth?* The tip of

his tail burned with embarrassment at the thought. *No, that's not going to work. Get a blanket or something, get her warm-*

"I'm fine," Isola said, her voice hoarse. Shakily, she got to her feet. "Really, I'm fine. It was just a bit of a shock. Is Bulbasaur okay…?"

As if in answer to her question, Bulbasaur suddenly shouted out, "Vulpix!" and ran in her direction, stumbling a bit as he recovered use of his legs. In another moment, he was by the vulpix's side. "She wasn't his by the wave, was she?" Bulbasaur called back to the rest of the pokémon present, though his eyes quickly answered his own question. Any part of her body that had been touching the ground was a bit wet up to about a paw's height. Other than that, she'd been far enough back to avoid essentially all of the wave.

"She's fine, you crybaby!" Lisa shouted. "What in the world were you guys doing to nearly drown yourselves, anyway?"

Bulbasaur ignored her, instead muttering something to himself as he stayed by Vulpix's side, occasionally breaking into renewed bouts of coughing.

Isola looked down at Cody, and he shrugged as best as his zigzagoon body could manage before leading the way over to where Ryan and Lisa were talking to Lapras.

As they came to a stop, Isola asked, "So Lapras, I guess you're the pokémon Guildmaster Elgyem sent to get us to Melodic Isle, right?"

Lapras nodded. "It's been a while since I've been on a proper adventure. I was quite glad that Elgyem requested my assistance. Though first of all, I think congratulations are in order - I've heard too many different versions of the story to know which is true, but by all accounts, it sounds like you defeated the source of this land's unrest. I'm glad to see you all came out unscathed."

"Thanks!" Cody said, becoming slightly less miserable.

"You know, Cody's such a sissy that he couldn't have done it without us," Lisa said smugly.

Ryan snorted. "You were unconscious when it really mattered, you know."

"You want to fight again?"

"Now, now, no reason to squabble," Lapras said, his gentle voice calming.

Isola, looking a lot less content with Lapras's compliment, looked back towards Bulbasaur and Vulpix sadly and commented, "The battle didn't come without its costs, though."

Lapras followed her gaze. "I heard about that. The vulpix was one of the humans, right?"

"Right," Ryan said. "And she can't wake up now. But that's what we're here for, and what you're here for, right? So we can make thing all right again."

Lapras smiled. "I can't agree more. So shall we be on our way, then? Though first, one question."

"Yeah?" Cody asked.

"How exactly is it that three of you ended up nearly drowning?"

Isola and Cody looked down at the ground, embarrassed, while Ryan responded with a laugh. "Well, Cody didn't jump into your wave until the very end, so he wasn't exactly 'drowning' until then. But other than that, I'm as curious as you."

"It's *his* fault," Cody muttered under his breath, casting a glance back towards Bulbasaur. *I don't care how sad you are for Vulpix, he didn't have to attack me over it!*

"Bulbasaur's just… He's under a lot of stress right now," Isola explained. "Cody was trying to, erm, help, in his own way, and the got into a fight. I tried to save Bulbasaur when he went under, but got pulled into the current myself."

"My own way? And what do you mean by that?" Cody asked. "He's the one who's being unreasonable!"

Cody said this loudly enough for Bulbasaur to hear, and the bulbasaur in turn looked back at the group, glaring specifically at Cody.

Lapras let out the slightest of sighs. "Well, it looks like we've got a tense journey ahead of us. But no matter. Let's be on our way."

"Are you certain we haven't passed it?" Bulbasaur asked, having rarely spoken a word the entire trip. The last streams of sunlight were currently leaking from the darkening sky, and the first stars of the night were reflecting on the broad expanse of the ocean that surrounded them in all directions.

"If Reshiram and Zekrom spoke the truth about it being due south of our starting point, then no, we haven't missed it," Lapras said. "I like to think that if I can find the space between fractions of a second, then I can likewise discern an island in the ocean, no matter how small it is."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to doubt you or anything," he said before lapsing into silence.

Rather than let the awkward silence of before continue, Ryan spoke up. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask, why bring along Vulpix right now? We don't even know if we'll find Meloetta."

Bulbasaur looked into the ocean below them. "I didn't really want to leave her behind. And besides, Reshiram thought that we might

need to be on Melodic Isle in order of Meloetta to help, and this saves us a trip if she's with us already."

"That is, if Meloetta's even there at all," Cody mumbled, still as grumpy towards Bulbasaur as he had been that afternoon.

"Will you just quit it?" Bulbasaur said seriously, though his voice also sounded tired, as if he didn't want to battle after the results of their earlier fight. In truth, both he and Isola were exhausted from earlier, their near drowning having taken a lot out of them. "We're going to find Meloetta, and Vulpix is going to be okay."

"But that's not guaranteed," Cody said, ignoring the warning look from Isola.

"And I'm saying it is."

"Is not."

"It is!" Bulbasaur said, more loudly this time. "You know, maybe I should've just come here on my own. I don't need you all."

This provoked a snort of derision from Lisa. "Yeah, just keep telling yourself that."

The comment did nothing to improve Bulbasaur's mood, and he quickly fell into a sullen silence.

Cody made a contented little noise and, rather than let the silence stand, said, "I'm just saying, you need to face the truth."

"Cody!" Ryan and Isola both chided in unison as Bulbasaur finally got to his feet.

"What's your problem?" Bulbasaur asked, positioning himself between two of Lapras's backspikes so he could see the zigzagoon better. "If you don't think I can save her, then you should've just stayed at your Guild!"

"And I'm just trying to keep you from getting hurt even more in case things don't go well!" Cody replied, though he remained sitting, his voice tauntingly impassive. "Sure, you'll do everything you can. But what if it's not even a matter of finding Meloetta if she's not on the island? What if we get to this island and find some pokémon tending her grave - what'll you do then?"

"That's not going to happen!"

"But what if it does? You'll have nowhere else to turn for help!"

"I will *not* have fighting on my back, I'll have you two know," Lapras said, turning his head to glare sternly at the two involved parties. Neither pokémon bothered defending himself.

Content that they had been stopped for the time being, Lapras returned his gaze back ahead of him, but continued to speak. "Bulbasaur, I have a story to tell you. Actually, all of you will find it interesting, though I do believe Team Misfits has already heard some of it. Are you all willing to listen?"

"We sure don't have anything better to do," Lisa said.

Bulbasaur seemed suspicious of his intentions, but nonetheless said, "I'll listen."

"Good," Lapras said. Then, his voice somehow becoming both louder and gentler, he said, "A number of years ago, I played a role in what has now become the greatest legend of my homeland. Like my father before me, and his mother before him, and for as many generations of my family as time can attest to, we were always guardians of a hidden land, a place from which time itself finds its source. Should the time ever come that something went wrong with time, it was our duty to guide a pokémon to that place, a pokémon chosen by the place itself.

"Three pokémon came to me, and I brought them to the Hidden Land. One, a chimchar, was the pokémon chosen to come. There

was a grovyle, who had come from the future of our world in order to help destroy the bleak future he came from. And there was a squirtle who for a long time before then hadn't understood why he had turned into a pokémon, nor did he remember anything before waking up as a pokémon."

Bulbasaur lifted his head attentively. "You mean he was a human? A human who could remember nothing about himself, just like Vulpix?"

"Well, this human at least remembered his name. But in other respects, his situation was like your friend's," Lapras said. "Like the grovyle, had come from the future. And because of that, he knew that saving the world would mean his own disappearance… and, in turn, that meant he would have to leave the chimchar who had become his closest friend."

"This story sounds familia-pfff!" Lisa was cut off as she got a filthy, fluffy tail stuffed in her face.

She shoved the tail from her face, but before she could complain or attack, Lapras cast her a withering glance and said, "I do *not* appreciate having my story interrupted, especially by my own passenger. If you'd like, you're more than welcome to take a dip in the ocean to keep yourself preoccupied with something more productive."

Lisa crossed her arms and grumbled, but didn't say anything more.

"Now, as I was saying… It was the hardest choice the human had ever had to make, but he chose to save the world so that his partner and all of his other new friends could live on in happiness, even if it meant that he would disappear completely from existence. His partner was devastated. But, as per his partner's last request, he lived on, making the world as good a place as he could."

The silence that followed seemed deeper than the very ocean that lay beneath them as everyone waited.

After what felt like hours later, though in reality was mere minutes, Bulbasaur asked in a small voice, "Was that chimchar ever able to move on?"

"Never. His friend's disappearance was always at the back of his mind," Lapras said. "But he also had the support of his guild, and all the friends he'd made on his journeys with his friend. So though he could never forget his friend, he accepted what had happened, and lived on in the world that his partner had given everything to save. And he lived on happily, because every good thing around him - the water dripping off the leaves, his friends, his world - all of that was what his friend wanted."

Another silence.

"So… So what do you want me to say? That I'm okay with Vulpix being gone?" Bulbasaur asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Because I'm not okay with it. I'll never be okay with it. I lost my parents, and somehow, Vulpix came into my life to help me through that. But I don't think the entire world could make up for her being gone. Everything makes me think of her, not of what she wanted. Even nearly drowning made me think of her, of the one time we really fought. Because even then, even though she's so afraid of water, she saved me. How am I supposed to just be okay with a friend like that being gone?"

"I don't want you to come to any conclusions right now," Lapras said. "But think, and dream. Think about what she wanted for you; dream about what she wanted for the world."

Even in the darkness, Cody perceived just the slightest shake of Bulbasaur's head; it was such a little movement that he thought maybe even Bulbasaur was unconscious of the fact that he'd done it.

"It's late. I'm going to sleep," Bulbasaur said.

Lapras nodded. "Then dream well."

It's been a while, huh?

Okay, but seriously, sorry for the wait! I was a bit burnt out on writing and, in addition to that, I just finished with finals last week and wanted to put my full effort into preparing for those. However, I have a long break ahead of me and will be getting out at least a chapter a week from now on, though with no particular release day of the week like I had before. The story will be completely over quite soon! Still getting back into the swing of things, though I do think this chapter turned out pretty all right. :)

And about these last few chapters - I'd originally intended to put them from Bulbasaur's point of view, but upon starting this chapter, opted to keep it with Cody, generally speaking. That being said, these chapters are sort of about Bulbasaur still, since he's sort of the classic PMD 'partner who got left behind.'

Yet again, sorry for the monthish(?) long break, and I hope you end up liking these last few chapters!

Chapter 38: Fears

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Fears

"Everyone, wake up! It seems like we've made it!" Lapras said.

Cody rolled over, put his paws over his ears, and grumbled something unintelligible.

"Oh, come on, Cody, this is what we've come all this way for," Ryan said, reaching into the water with his tail and splashing a bit on Cody's face. Cody immediately jumped to his feet but, not yet aware of his surroundings, he found himself slipping off of Lapras's shell. He quite nearly fell into the water, but an outstretched vine saved him, pulling him back up to the stability of Lapra's spikes; only his tail got to experience the unpleasant chill of the early morning ocean.

Cody shook out his wet tail, making sure to splash the excess water in Ryan's face. "Uh, thanks," he said to Bulbasaur, blearily rubbing his eyes. However, Bulbasaur had already turned his attention south, to where a little dark blob could be seen, becoming larger by the second, the first rays of sunlight beginning to skip across the myriad waves toward it.

"Have you been swimming all night, Lapras?" Bulbasaur asked.

He glanced back at his passengers. "I took a brief rest during the night. But I assure you, I'm used to long journeys such as this. I crossed countless oceans before arriving here in this land, after all."

"Even if you say that… Thanks. Thank you so much for bringing us here," Bulbasaur said. "Now everything can go back to normal."

If we're lucky. Which we never are… Cody thought pessimistically, though his bad mood towards Bulbasaur had more or less dissipated during the night, so he didn't bother to voice his concerns. *I guess*

Bulbasaur can have his hope for now. And if Meloetta isn't there… Well, he'll just have to deal with that when it comes.

As they neared, they could see strange shapes rearing up from the island. "It looks… It's almost like the twisted metal dunes of Cobalion's island," Bulbasaur said. "Or some of them are like that, at least."

Finally awake enough, Cody took a look as well, and shared in the confusion. *They definitely don't look natural. That big one on the left… A tree? But branches don't curve like that. And other parts of the island look like big rocks or something, but they're too jagged, like someone else came and broke whatever they used to be…*

The sky grew ever brighter as the sun peeked out over the waves. Cody's eyes adjusted as he got another better look at the thing he had been examining.

… *Oh. That's because they* are *broken.*

No one spoke a word as the scenery unfolded before them. What was once a towering column of twisted stone towards one side of the island now ended in a jagged pinnacle, the rest of its height crumbled to the ground, some still leaning against the base; the tree that Cody had seen with its odd but gracefully knotted branches was bare of leaves, its blackened trunk having been scoured by fire sometime in the distant past. Other scorched foliage and warped boulders were also scattered about the island, coming into focus as the group drew ever nearer.

A fire? An earthquake? Both? What could have caused so much destruction?

Lapras beached himself upon the island. "I know it's a disappointment," he said gently, "but you might find some clue as to what happened if you explore. I'll stay here. Just leave Vulpix on my back."

Bulbasaur nodded resolutely and jumped onto shore, seemingly unperturbed by the increasingly bleak outlook of their quest. Not to be outdone, Lisa jumped off as well, though she settled with staying just a tad behind Bulbasaur as they walked forward. "Come on, no sense waiting here," she said. "Unless you guys're scared of a little island, which isn't allowed on Team Misfits."

Scared wasn't how Cody would put it as he, Ryan, and Isola got off and started to follow just behind Bulbasaur and Lisa. *More like… Unsettled. This place seems like it must've been beautiful once. Now it's completely obliterated.*

It wasn't a large island at all, at least relatively speaking; even Keldeo's island up north had been bigger. Cody guessed this island stretched about a mile ahead of him, and maybe a mile to either side. Even from his low to the ground perspective he could tell that it curved around somewhat, such that the place where Lapras had landed could almost be called a bay.

Not far ahead of the group was a large mound of earth, heaped up in what seemed like the exact center of the island lengthwise, though rather close to them widthwise. It was to this mound that Bulbasaur first led the group, and from its vantage they saw fully the devastation that had been wreaked upon the island.

Of course, it was difficult to say exactly how great the devastation was at first, since none of them knew how the island was supposed to look. For the most part, they couldn't even imagine how it should have looked, for what was left was too strange to quite make sense of. Cody couldn't tell how the fluted boulders and metallic spires had originally been molded, nor could he say if the oddly hollow trunks and branches of the barren trees had always been as such or if the old fire had scoured out the inner parts of the trunks.

As the group looked on at the destruction around them, it occurred to Cody how much the island reminded him of a concert hall, only distorted to be more in line with what was more natural and available. The mound they sat upon was the conductor's stand, and

the small trees in front with their branches riddled with holes could be flutes, and-

Wait a minute… Meloetta is *supposed to be a musical pokémon, right? Then-*

Both perplexed and curious, Cody trotted down the mound to inspect one of the trees at the front. Sure enough, he imagined that if there was some pokémon with hands big enough to cover the holes, it could be played like a wind instrument. Excited by his discovery, he scampered further back and next came across a huge root emerging from the ground, like a bubble of bark. It was split open in several places, but Cody nonetheless gave it a solid whack with his tail, and the sound resounded for a short time like that of a drum.

By now, the others were exploring the odd, broken formations as well, but as Cody continued to zag about from place to place, he could see he was the only one who understood it. The arch of stone with withered vines hanging from it had probably been just like a harp. Then there were the scattered roots that popped up from the ground like xylophone keys, along with the low-hanging branches that might have hit them had the wind blown upon them right. Most of those branches were broken or brittle now, but in the prime of the tree's life it might've worked. At another section of the island, hollow, twisting boulders billowed outwards like the bells of brass instruments, though the only sounds they now carried was that of the stagnant water trapped within as the occasional breeze rippled through the ancient stones.

"It's an orchestra!" Cody eventually shouted. The others, scattered among the other natural instruments, shot him looks of confusion, and he realized they probably didn't have anything similar here in the pokémon world. "I mean, all the things here used to make music. They're just all broken now. But this is definitely Melodic Isle, in case there were any doubts before."

Bulbasaur wasn't cheered by this observation. "Which means our search for Meloetta is at a dead end."

"Er, might want to watch your terminology there," Ryan said, having stopped halfway over to the rest of the group as he looked at something in the shadow of one of the massive hollow stones. "Looking at this poor guy, I'd rather not think of it as a 'dead' end, if you get my drift."

The others drifted over to where Ryan was and saw bleached bones scattered across a wide swath of ground; Cody had missed them in his first pass through, but Ryan had since managed to sweep off the layer of dirt and scrubby grass that had mostly hidden them.

"Looks like a flock of wingull," Isola said with a grimace. "Poor things…"

"Think it was a bad storm that blew them here? Hit them against the rocks or something?" Bulbasaur asked.

Lisa poked at a wingull skull with a large section of it bashed in. "I don't know a storm that hits anything with *that* much force," she said. "Besides, a storm definitely didn't char the vaporeon bones I saw over there." She pointed back in the direction she'd been searching.

"And you didn't mention that one until now?" Cody asked incredulously. His fur was sticking up and out of place, his nervousness apparent. Skeletons just lying around like this gave him the creeps. "I feel like dead pokémon is a good thing to alert everyone to!"

Lisa shrugged. "Aw, get over it. They aren't gonna hurt us, and that vaporeon was long dead anyway."

"Anyway, it its charred, do you think it just got stuck here when the fire must've happened?" Ryan asked. "Injured or something, so couldn't get back to sea quick enough?"

Lisa scoffed. "Not unless wild fires here burn like hyper beam attacks. A few of the bone frills were completely fried, and that side of the skull was pretty charred. Something attacked it."

"You don't think… It couldn't have been Meloetta that attacked it, right?" Isola asked.

"Reshiram and Zekrom made it seem like she was friendly enough," Ryan said. "Then again, they also haven't seen her for ages. Who knows what's happened to her in that time? Maybe she went crazy being out her by herself, with only passing amphibious sea pokémon or low-flying wingull for company? Or maybe something else scared her, and she got overly defensive towards any intruders. Or maybe whatever attacked these pokémon got her, too."

Bulbasaur suddenly turned and went off towards the blackened tree on one side of the island. "Meloetta's fine. Maybe she just ran off somewhere and lost track of time - who knows how immortal pokémon look at years?" he said over his shoulder to Team Misfits. "Maybe she doesn't think she's been gone so long. I'm going to look for more clues."

As he got farther away, Ryan, Isola, and Cody all turned to each other.

"He's going to have to face it eventually," Cody said. "There's nothing here - no Meloetta, no nothing."

"Who's going to have to face what? We talking about Bulbasaur?" Lisa asked.

"Yes, Bulbasaur," Ryan said. "It's certainly taken you long enough to realize we've been worried about him his whole time. Dense much?" Before Lisa could burst into argument or battle, Ryan continued, "*Anyway*, what're we going to do? Let him spend days here turning this island inside out for a clue? Because that's the only end to this I see."

Isola shook her head. "I mean, we'll stop him if we have to, but we've still got all day. There is a chance we'll find some clue here, after all. And if he's not willing to leave after sleeping on everything that we've found - or haven't found - then…"

"… then we'll have to get him to see sense," Cody concluded.

"Yeah, well, this time, leave that to Isola and me," Ryan said. "I don't think yelling and battle is the best way to solve things."

"It wasn't *my* fault," Cody mumbled.

"You keep saying that, but I don't think you quite understand the meaning of the word 'fault,'" Ryan said.

A chuckle escaped Isola's beak. "Well, let's keep on looking. Maybe we really will find something to tell us what happened to Meloetta."

The group broke up, Cody sulkily dragging his tail against the ground as he moved off towards the largest instrument of the island, the broken spire of stone they'd seen while still at sea.

Still, if Isola and Ryan want to deal with him, then they're more than welcome to, Cody thought. *I feel sorry for him, but I don't know what to say when all he does is start fighting and yelling and…*

He took a breath, shaking himself as if to physically rid himself of that train of thought. *I can't even stay angry about all that… I just wish I knew how to help him.*

Though Cody had been heading for the spire, something caught his eye somewhere beyond it, something half covered with dirt and the scrubby grass that tried to survive on the desolate island. Whatever it was was dimmed by the grime, but it appeared to be somewhat shiny.

Like… metal? Is it? Some of the island's instruments are sort of metallic, but this one's sort of out by itself.

He neared it and sniffed it cautiously, and the smell of steel filled his nose, as well as other, less detectable scents that set him on edge. He thought he could smell blood, although the metal scent almost

completely engulfed the similarly iron-filled odor. But clearer was the faintest of burning smells, very distinct from the cold metal.

Cody turned, using his tail to brush off the worst of the dirt, revealing that the metal was purple in color, and put together like some sort of machine. *Is it a pokémon? I've seen some weird pokémon, but this thing… It really* does *look like sheets of metal put together, welded and screwed in place. Like something human-made. I guess I've seen gears and magnets as pokémon, but… Hmm… Well, nothing to it. Might as well dig it up and see for myself.*

He started clawing at the ground around it, to try to see if uncovering more of it would reveal what it was. Almost as soon as his paws brushed the metal, however, he heard a whirring noise, like a motor coming to life; and in the next moment, the metal creature sprang out of the earth, hitting Cody under the jaw and knocking him off his feet.

Cody was stunned, but he had enough sense by now to roll back to his feet as fast as he could, trying to get out of harm's way in case whatever he'd found was as aggressive as its abrupt jerk upwards had been. He moved not a moment too soon; before his vision had even returned perfectly back to normal, he heard the swish and thunk of something embedding itself in the ground where he'd been a second ago. Realizing that he might not be fast enough to escape this thing in a flat run depending on what it was like, Cody spun to face the creature, ready to dodge or attack as need be. Only then did he see the creature he'd awoken in full.

A bug… robot?

That was the only way to describe the purple thing that stood in front of him as it withdrew its spike of an arm from the ground. It very roughly resembled a scyther in body shape, albeit a scyther without the scythes and covered from head to toe with heavily metal plating. If there was indeed an actual bug left inside, Cody had no idea how even begin breaking the hard outer shell to get to it. Atop its back was something that looked suspiciously cannon-like, mounted forward so that Cody could see into its black depths.

Except the depths weren't black; Cody could see a burning red light deep within, becoming brighter and nearer until-

"Cody, get out of the way!"

Cody came to his senses and jumped to the side right as Isola slammed into the insect that, despite how imposing it was, wasn't much taller than her. The beam of energy came out of the cannon's barrel like a focused explosion and hit the ocean just off of the island's shore. The ocean immediately bubbled up and burst in a cloud of boiling water and steam, made suddenly volatile by the intense heat of the blast.

"That was no hyper beam!" Ryan said as he ran past Cody, coming in with an iron tail attack, knocking away the slash attack aimed at Isola.

Cody couldn't agree more; the sheer power of the attack had matched that of a hyper beam, but the color had been redder than any hyper beam Cody had seen, and the beam itself almost reminiscent of how he remembered the sight of Vulpix's final overheat to have been. *And aside from its aim being knocked off, it hardly seems fazed by Cody's iron tail attack. It looks like it's a steel type, which probably doesn't help, but even so… Just how strong is this thing? This thing couldn't actually be Meloetta, could it? That would explain the power, if it was something on par with Reshiram and Zekrom. But…*

Lisa and Bulbasaur suddenly rushed past, right as Ryan was knocked back, blood seeping from a wound on his chest inflicted by a metal claw attack.

"Lisa, use fire punch!" Cody said as he ran forward to rejoin the fray, hoping his bug/steel analysis was correct.

"On it!" Lisa said as flames leapt to her hand and she jumped forward, slugging the thing in the head and knocking it on its back; at

the very least, the thing was phased, though whether the fire punch had done any lasting damage was hard to say.

Bulbasaur quickly wrapped his vines around the monster's middle, pinning its arms to its sides as it lay on the ground. "Ryan, Cody, fry it!"

Cody hesitated for a moment, not wanting to hurt Bulbasaur's vines with an attack. But when Ryan got to his feet and, still trying to stem the flow of blood, fired off a thunderbolt at the enemy, Cody went ahead and followed suit. Whether it was because they were just vines or thanks to the type disadvantage, Bulbasaur barely felt the shock, while the robot bug on the ground suffered the full force of the double thunderbolt.

"Who are you, and what's happened to Meloetta?" Bulbasaur asked over the sound of the cackling electricity.

However, the creature had been stunned only momentarily by the electricity; it now spread its arms with enough force that Bulbasaur had to let go; his vines would have snapped otherwise. The creature was immediately on its feet, and before anyone could react again, Cody found himself once again the target of the fiery canon on the creature's back.

Why am I *always the one in the line of fire?* Cody managed to think just as the beam fired. Searing pain shot through his body as his senses were overwhelmed: light all around him, the smell of his own burning fur and flesh, the loud booming of the exploding ground when the beam went off course thanks to his team's quick intervention.

He was barely able to stay conscious after that, but the things he did see and feel were vivid, as if they were the only things in existence. He felt himself lift off the ground as Isola grabbed his tail roughly in her beak and took him away from the burning grass that surrounded him, though he barely even registered when she eventually dropped him to the ground and kicked dirt on top of him to extinguish the

smoldering fur. He watched her rejoin the battle, but things were going badly. Ryan was flagging, limping due to a new slash mark on a leg; Lisa had apparently taken a glancing blow from the canon, if the ugly scorch mark darkening her tail was anything to go by. Isola was uninjured and joining the battle now, but she was best with physical attacks, which could only go so far against something as heavily armored as this creature. The creature, meanwhile, didn't seem to have a scratch on it.

Bulbasaur, despite being uninjured, seemed to be frozen, his eyes darting nervously back and forth between the low fires spreading around him and the canon atop the monster's back.

All at once, the battle went rapidly downhill. The monster fired off its canon, and though it caught no one directly in the blast, the rest of the battlers were sent flying backwards by the explosion. While the others got to their feet and prepared to fight again, Bulbasaur suddenly turned tail, running full-speed back to Lapras.

Next thing Cody knew in his daze, Isola had tossed him onto her back and she was following Bulbasaur's lead back to Lapras. Ryan and Lisa were following just behind, much to Cody's dim surprise. *Then again, I guess even Lisa won't fight a losing battle, not if it's to the death.* In the distance, Cody could see the purple creature, but it seemed to be getting smaller. Perhaps its battle reaction time was quick, but in a straight run, it couldn't match even Bulbasaur's relatively slow pace.

Cody was fading in and out of consciousness now, the pain of his back being the only thing that kept jolting him into wakefulness. He blacked out for a time. In the next moment awake, he realized they were on Lapras's back and speeding away from the island. The insect was still chasing them, but soon after it ran off of the dry beach, it seemed to hit an invisible wall. It came to an abrupt halt and, after the briefest of pauses, let out a menacing screeching cry.

It lowered its canon and took aim at them, and whatever was holding the creature itself back had no such affect on the attack. Cody felt

Lapras begin to swerve back and forth as he dodged the incoming attacks, but he blacked out again before he could know whether or not they escaped.

When next Cody awoke, he awoke more permanently, a bell-like sound ringing pleasantly in the air and soothing him. He opened his eyes right as Lapras shut his mouth, cutting off the gentle tone.

"Feeling better now?" Lapras asked, his head turned back to look at Cody and the others while he continued to carry them north, back towards the mainland.

"Much better, thanks," Ryan said, examining his now crusting wounds.

Lisa poked her burnt tail. "Still hurts, but I'll live."

"Not sure if I will," Cody piped up. Though he did feel much better and was conscious again, his back still prickled painfully every time he shifted even slightly. Though he had to admit that his back was probably the best place for him to have gotten hit by the blast, that didn't stop it from hurting like hell.

"Still, you're healed enough to be awake and talking again," Isola said. "You have Lapras's heal bell to thank for that."

Think I would've preferred to stay unconscious, he thought, though aloud he said, "Yeah, thanks for that. So we got away, huh?"

"Somehow," Lapras said. "What was that thing that was chasing you? I've rarely seen pokémon with that much firepower."

"Cody's the one who found it," Lisa said. "Maybe *he* can explain what he did to make it so angry."

Cody got to his feet defensively, ignoring the pain that erupted across his back as a result. "It wasn't my fault!" he insisted. "It looked

like a buried piece of metal. I barely touched it and it just attacked me!"

"Poking your nose where it doesn't belong again," Ryan said, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "This is how we always get into trouble, Cody."

"We should go back," Bulbasaur interjected out of nowhere, though his voice was quiet.

Everyone looked at him. "You crazy?" Ryan asked. "We just barely escaped that thing with our lives. I think its safe to say that if Meloetta was ever on that island, she hightailed it out of there long ago to get away from that thing."

"I'm all for going back, actually," Lisa said. "That was the best fight I've had in a long while! But I don't know why *you're* the one suggesting it, Bulbasaur." She looked over at him critically, her arms crossed. "You didn't even take a hit and you were still the first to run back like a hatchling. You still got that stupid fear of fire or something?"

"That's why I've got to go back!" Bulbasaur said. "I hate myself! I can't believe I ran - a fire-type attack and a little grass fire, and I couldn't even take that much! This is all to save Vulpix, and yet I *still* couldn't do it! She faced her own fears to save me many times, but I… I couldn't do the same for her! I could face anything when she was with me, but now…" he paused, collecting his thoughts. Then, more calmly and resolutely, he continued, "I've got to go back. If we can defeat that pokémon, maybe it can tell us where Meloetta went. I've gotta do it for Vulpix."

Lisa scoffed. "Pretty words, but they're nothing more than that. You'll just run again."

Bulbasaur glared at her defiantly, but didn't respond.

"See? Won't even deny it," Lisa said. "And you call yourself Vulpix's partner. From what I can tell, she doesn't even deserve a wimp like you."

"Lisa! That's going too far," Isola said as Bulbasaur seemed to slump down, even his bulb seeming to deflate somewhat.

"I'm just speaking my mind," Lisa said unapologetically. "If he's gonna be unreasonable about saving Vulpix, he might as well have the guts to back himself up. Instead, he's got *us* doing all the fighting."

Sheesh, is this how I sounded when I was trying to get Bulbasaur to see reason? Maybe I really do need an attitude check, Cody thought. Then, in a rare moment of thoughtfulness, he said, "Can we at least get back to land and rest a day? Then we can decide whether to go back. I'm not going to be any use much sooner than that anyway, even with a few more heal bells."

"Well, you're never of any use in the first place," Lisa said, though Cody could tell this was a joke, mostly.

"Ha ha, funny," Cody said. Then, turning to Bulbasaur, he asked again, "So, what do you say? Get back to land, and then you can decide what we do, if it's even worth the bother of going back?"

"I'm fairly exhausted as well," Lapras added. "I'd appreciate just getting back to land and resting, I must admit."

Bulbasaur hesitated, looking to Vulpix for a moment. "All right," he eventually said. "We'll wait."

Cody thought Bulbasaur would be happy to have an excuse to wait to decide. Cody knew he would've been glad for it, at least. But instead, Bulbasaur became absolutely silent, looking more depressed than ever.

This is what I was afraid of, Cody thought. *He's realizing that we might not be able to do anything for Vulpix. And even worse, he's blaming himself for not being able to do anything. There's got to be something I can say to him… I don't even feel like saying "I told you so" with things like this.*

But Cody couldn't think of a thing that would help, especially not with Lisa around. Whatever respect the kangaskhan had possessed concerning Bulbasaur, it was completely gone now, having disappeared the moment Bulbasaur had fled without even trying to fight. So long as they were stuck floating upon Lapras's back, Lisa would probably be petty enough to counter it.

Cody sighed. *I'm not sure that I won't make things worse, but… Tonight. After we're all back on land, and everyone else is asleep, I'll try to talk to Bulbasaur.*

I really just need to quit setting goals for chapter updates when I'm just going to break them… Though admittedly, I feel like being only a day late with it being Christmas week isn't too bad. And setting goals keeps me feeling pressured, which is good, otherwise I'd never get this thing finished.

So… I feel like the pacing is being kinda weird with this whole "post-game" section, mainly because I keep on changing things up from what I'd planned… But since this is also very distinctive from the "main story" of this fic, I don't mind the difference too terribly much. :) Maybe it's even a good thing?

Anyway, hope you all had a merry Christmas! Or whatever other holiday you celebrate - not to be biased, just Christmas is the one I was raised with, and it's pretty clearly the most known, at least here in the good ol' U S of A. ^_^ So whatever the occasion it was for you (if indeed there was one), hope it was great! And if there wasn't one, well, hope it was at least a good week for you!

Chapter 39: Memory

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Memory

When they finally reached land, it was already late in the night. Everyone on Lapras's back roused themselves for long enough to get onto land, where they quickly collapsed back into sleep on the soft sand. Lapras likewise drifted off to sleep almost immediately upon beaching herself.

Cody, who wasn't as tired as the others, didn't fall asleep immediately; he'd slept most of the way back, attempting to recover from his injuries. Rest wasn't a move he'd ever used before, and he wasn't entirely sure he counted it as a legitimate technique. But Ryan had treated it as such and, technique or not, sleeping was easy enough to pull off. Admittedly, he did feel almost *too* refreshed now, and his back, though sore to touch, didn't hurt so much anymore.

It was due to this little excess of energy that he was still awake when he heard Bulbasaur lifting Vulpix off of Lapras's back soon after their arrival.

Guess now's as good a time as any to see if Bulbasaur wants to talk, Cody thought as he opened his eyes. *I won't be falling back asleep at this rate, anyway.*

Cody got to his feet and walked quietly over to Bulbasaur, who had just finished lying Vulpix on the ground, well out of reach of the waves. He looked up wearily as Cody approached, and Cody couldn't help but think that he looked like a pokémon much older than his age.

"Need something?" Bulbasaur asked, his voice tired but not purposefully antagonistic.

"Oh, um, I was just wondering…" Cody started, not entirely sure of what to say. "Er, want to go for a walk? Unless you're too tired, of course, I know it's the middle of the night and all. But I was, I dunno, sort of wanting to talk to you, if you'd hear me out. But I don't want to wake up them." He jerked his head towards the rest of the group.

Bulbasaur didn't respond right away, and Cody didn't blame him for hesitating. After all, the last time they'd really "talked," it had ended in a fight on this very beach. *But I won't be that stupid this time. Hopefully I can choose my words a bit more tactfully.*

"All right," Bulbasaur said. "I don't feel much like sleeping."

Cody gave him a weak but genuine little smile, then led the way, heading west along the beach. Even once they were out of earshot of the rest of the group, they walked in silence, Cody taking a while to think of the words to say. It took him even longer to swallow his pride enough to actually decide to say them, once he had thought of the right words. But Bulbasaur didn't seem to mind the wait; either he knew how hard he was to talk to at the moment, or he was too caught up in his own thoughts to notice how far away from the rest of the group they'd already come.

Eventually, Cody spoke. "So, Bulbasaur. I, um… I just want to say I'm sorry for the other day. The fight and everything. I was being rude."

Bulbasaur didn't respond, which annoyed Cody a first. However, he quickly choked down that annoyance, swallowing it like he had his pride. *Bulbasaur is going through a lot right now, and it's hard enough to say the right thing even when I'm not annoyed with him… Best to keep my head right now.*

"You see, I just… Well, I, I didn't want things to end up like this, no matter how pessimistic I was being back then," Cody said. "I really wanted us to just find Meloetta and for everything else to go back to normal. I'm sorry that's not how it happened."

Bulbasaur muttered something.

"Um, sorry, missed that," Cody said hesitantly. *Is he still angry, or-*

"You shouldn't be the one apologizing," Bulbasaur said, looking at the sand in front of him as the duo continued to walk along. "This shouldn't be your responsibility, but you're helping out anyway, and you got hurt."

Cody relaxed a bit. "Ah, it's not too bad. Already feels a lot better. The fur took the worst of the blast and helped to protect my skin a bit, and the fur'll grow back. Don't beat yourself up about it too much."

They fell into silence. Cody considered suggesting that they turn around, but Bulbasaur seemed deep in thought about something; Cody didn't want to disturb him.

So they kept on walking and walking along the beach, until Bulbasaur burst out in a louder voice than necessary, saying, "I'm absolutely worthless! Vulpix gave up absolutely everything to save me and this world, and now… Now I'm terrified just thinking about that stupid monster!" Cody could see now that Bulbasaur was shaking, though he continued to take step after guilty step forward. "I was able to shout down Reshiram himself with an entire forest fire in front of me once! But, but… That was when I had Vulpix with me! Even right after Vulpix lost control and turned into that ninetails, right when she needed me most, I eventually froze up, because of her fire! Lisa was absolutely right. Vulpix always deserved to have a better partner than me!"

Cody was completely speechless for a second. Then, he raised his voice to match Bulbasaur's and said, "Lisa's not right, she's just a jerk. You're doing everything you can to help Vulpix, right? That's more than most pokémon would do. And you haven't just thrown in the towel, even with the impossible in the way."

Bulbasaur looked away, his body shaking all the more. *He seems almost… angry. Like he's suddenly enraged at himself. He's not…?* "You aren't just giving up, are you?"

"I just don't know! I… I want to save Vulpix more than anything else. But even if we go back, what more can we learn? Meloetta wasn't there, and I'm not even sure if the thing that attacked us can talk. So how would we find her? I don't know what to do, because everything ends in a dead end!"

Cody didn't know how to respond to this. As much as he wanted to encourage Bulbasaur, what the grass-type was saying now was exactly how Cody saw things, and how he'd thought of things possibly going from the beginning. *I don't think we'll find anything new from the island, even if we beat that creature… So how do I convince him to not give up entirely?* "What if we beat the creature and brought it to Reshiram and Zekrom? They might know something about it. Or we could even talk to my guildmaster about it - Guildmaster Elgyem's a bit ditzy, but he knows a lot. If we went to him before returning to the island, he might even tell us how to beat it."

"Wishful thinking," Bulbasaur muttered. "If anyone knew anything about that creature, it'd at least be a story to scare hatchlings and keep them from wandering off. But I've never heard of anything like it."

"So you really are just giving up?"

Bulbasaur didn't respond.

No… no way. Cody thought, his heart dropping into his feet. *I might've been worried for him when he wouldn't even consider us not being able save Vulpix, but… I don't want him to give up. Not so soon.*

"Bulbasaur, you remember that Kyurem got me for a while?" Cody asked, and not bothering to wait for an answer, he continued, "I was

scared then. I knew Emma was going to catch me, and I couldn't do a thing. And then after that… all I remember is darkness and cold, and being trapped in my own head. I don't know if that's what's going on with Vulpix or not, but are you really just toing to give up on her if she is? I don't even like to think about what would've happened to me if Isola hadn't stuck by my side and helped me snap out of it… Maybe I never would've woken back up. So are you just going to abandon Vulpix when she's waiting on you to come through for her?"

"No! It's not that!" Bulbasaur said. "But… Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"Honestly? I don't know," Cody said. "Maybe you were right, back when we fought that first time. Maybe, even if you don't have any leads at all, if Elgyem knows nothing and the creature doesn't tell us anything if we beat it, maybe even then you should just keep on searching."

"But you said before-"

"I know what I said before, and I still think that's right. Vulpix doesn't want you forgetting to live, forgetting to have your own life and to enjoy it. Hell, if I hadn't woken up, I wouldn't have wanted Isola to waste her life sitting at my side, trying to get through to me. But I wouldn't have wanted her to forget about me or to give up on me either, you know?"

"I don't know if I can do that, though. Just keep on living," Bulbasaur said quietly. "Whether I give up or just keep on trying to help her my entire life… I feel responsible. Every second she stays asleep, it's because I'm failing her. I know she wouldn't want me to be miserable, but how can I be anything else?"

The despair the permeated Bulbasaur's voice so flooded Cody's own body that for a moment, he couldn't respond. "I… I don't know," he admitted. "But maybe… She was always happy when you were happy, right? And the other way around, too - you were happy when she was. That's how friends are, how teammates are. So imagine if

she's able to see what you're doing now, just despairing about saving her. It'd only make her sadder. That's what I think. So even if there's no way of saving her, you've got to keep your head up. It's the best thing you can do for her."

Bulbasaur shook his head. "I can try, but… I don't think it'll work."

The two of them had been walking for a long time along the beach, and for the first time now they scenery changed somewhat. The beach up until now had been more or less straight; but just ahead of them, it was as if a massive bite had been taken out of the shore, which the ocean had filled to form a peaceful bay with calm waves drifting across the surface. The light of the stars and moon reflected much more visibly here than it could in the more turbulent ocean, and as they reached the bay's shore, even Bulbasaur couldn't quite tear his eyes from the beauty of the sight.

Seeing that the view distracted even Bulbasaur from his troubles, Cody tried again to convince him. "You see, it's stuff like this Vulpix probably wanted to protect. So that you could see it someday. Don't you think?"

Bulbasaur smiled a little bit. "Maybe so."

They sat at the water's edge for a time, listening to the lapping of the waves against the shore and watching the shimmering stars dance across the water. Cody was starting to get tired now, and he thought it would be best to head back. *Still, though, he's not as depressed now, and he's clearly thinking hard… I'd best not disturb him.* He tried to stay awake, but found himself starting to nod off as the moon made its way through the sky.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been dozing when, his eyes half closed, he thought he saw something at the shore somewhere right of them, where the water of the bay came as far inland as it could. It took him a moment to quite take in the sight, but then he was suddenly on his feet, jerked into wakefulness by the surprise of seeing anyone else up at this hour.

"Something wrong?" Bulbasaur asked.

Cody shook his head and rubbed his eyes, then looked back up. Sure enough, his sleepy mind hadn't deceived him; a pokémon not too much taller than Ryan was standing on the shore. What's more, Cody's sudden movement had caught her attention, and she was now staring at the duo while Cody stared right on back.

"Looks like we're not the only ones enjoying the night air," Cody said, calming down quickly after his jolt into wakefulness. "Should we say hi…? It's just sort of looking at us."

Bulbasaur shook his head. "We should probably head back."

Still, Cody was curious. True, he was looking from a distance, but he didn't think he'd seen a pokémon of its species before. Though it was hard to tell, it looked to be bipedal, and Cody thought it was one of the few nearly human-shaped pokémon he'd met. Ignoring Bulbasaur's advice to rejoin the rest of the group, Cody balanced on his hind legs and raised a forepaw in as good a wave as he could manage.

The pokémon lifted a thin arm and waved back, then proceeded to start walking along the beach towards them.

"Really, we should leave," Bulbasaur said. "I'm… I'm not really in the mood to talk."

"Well, I'll talk then," Cody said, though he did feel a bit guilty for initiating contact, now that he thought about how much Bulbasaur was going through. Still, there was nothing for it, and he couldn't deny that he was still curious about what this human-shaped pokémon was, and why it was out here by itself so late. *It could be nocturnal, I guess.* Another suggestion coming to mind, he said to Bulbasaur, "Or you can start heading back, if you'd like. I'll catch up."

Bulbasaur let out a bit of a sigh, but stayed with Cody as the zigzagoon led the way up the beach in order to meet the pokémon

halfway. As they neared, Cody guessed that the pokémon was definitely a she, or at least she would be by human standards. She looked to be wearing a black dress that fanned out in four separate sections around her, somewhat reminiscent of a ballerina's tutu, and her bright red hair was in bun atop her head, pinned in place by a large black hair clip. A badly fractured gem was tied to the center of her forehead, and a sash at her waist matched the red of her hair and eyes. The hands were perhaps the least human part of her, more like big flat clubs than anything.

Of course, as soon as they finally reached each other, Cody realized he had no idea what to say. He was rarely in the lead when meeting new pokémon, since he was usually with his team. The only thing he really wanted to ask was what sort of pokémon she was, but callous though he could often be, even he had enough social grace to avoid skipping straight to that.

Thankfully, the other pokémon seemed friendly enough as she spoke up in a very expressive, definitely feminine voice. "Hello, don't think I've ever seen you around these parts. I'm Melody." She did a little curtsy, a vibrant smile on her face.

Strange, to go straight to her actual name. Unless that is her species name..? "My name's Cody, and yeah, I'm not from here. We're just passing through. Anyway, nice to meet you," he said, genuinely pleased despite his confusion. She seemed very nice, and meeting someone like that always got Cody's mood up. Especially when contrasted to the sarcastic and violent teammates he normally had to deal with. "Oh, and this is Bulbasaur," Cody added as an afterthought when Bulbasaur stayed more or less behind him, not saying a word. "So, um… Do you live around here, then? And are you usually up at this hour?"

"Um, no and no," Melody said. Cody noticed that she couldn't quite stand still, constantly shifting her weight from foot to foot, though she did it so subtly that it seemed to Cody almost like the swaying of someone in a slow dance. "I travel around a lot, but I come back here often. So I was surprised to see anyone else out here at this

hour, nonetheless pokémon I didn't know. Though maybe I shouldn't be surprised. Tranquil Bay is quite the place to be on a beautiful night like tonight."

"Is that what this place is called?" Cody asked. "Well, I agree with you on it being the place to be. We just stumbled across it while we were walking." Then, unable to hold back his curiosity any longer, he continued, "So, Melody, huh? Is that your name, or what pokémon like you are called? I've never seen a pokémon like you."

Cody felt like it was a fairly legitimate question, but Melody seemed caught off guard a bit by it. He quickly tried to cover his embarrassment, adding, "Well, then again, there are a lot of kinds of pokémon I don't know. I think this is the farthest west I've ever been, so-"

"No, it's a fair enough question," Melody said, smiling as she recovered. "I get it a lot, actually. Guess I'm just in a weird mood tonight. Anyway, I can't really tell you what I am, because I honestly don't know. I've never met any other pokémon like me."

This got even Bulbasaur's attention, who had previously just been looking out across the water, not at all interested in the conversation. "But surely you at least have parents? They would've told you." The question seemed to pain Bulbasaur, and Cody recalled that he himself didn't have parents anymore.

Melody shook her head. "Amnesia. Don't remember any childhood or anything like that. Not that I mind," she added hurriedly. "I'm happy enough as I am. I just sometimes wonder what happened; the first thing I remember is waking up here on this beach, almost dead from battle wounds."

"It's like Vulpix," Bulbasaur said, clearly surprised.

"Vulpix?" Melody asked.

Cody didn't want to have to explain that whole story with Bulbasaur around, but thankfully, Bulbasaur was more than willing to join the conversation now. "My partner. We are… I mean, we were a team together at the Western Guild. When I met her, she'd just woken up on a river's shore without any memories. She didn't even know her name."

"I can sympathize with that. I don't remember my original name, either. Melody is just the name I took," Melody said. "But, if you don't mind me asking… What happened to your partner? Did she ever figure out her past? Maybe if you told me something, it might help me figure out how to figure out my own past. I figure I must've come from across the ocean since I washed up here, but I feel so at home here that that doesn't feel right… Well, enough about that. So what about your friend?"

Bulbasaur went silent, and Cody decided he could speak up now, since Bulbasaur had been at least willing to mention Vulpix. "Well, it's sort of a long story. You heard about all that stuff with Kyurem and the humans and everything?"

"Of course. It would be hard *not* to have heard about it, though admittedly, I'm not entirely sure what's truth and what's fiction."

"We were sort of involved in all that," Cody said, grinning a bit now. *After all, who doesn't love a bit of bragging?* "Bulbasaur's partner, Vulpix, was a human before she woke up in the world. And so was I, for that matter, though I didn't have amnesia like she did."

Melody's eyes opened wide. "You're not pulling my leg?" she asked, leaning down and looking more closely at Cody. "You look just like a zigzagoon!"

"Cross my heart, complete truth," Cody said, just as the very beginnings of an idea started to form in his mind. *Now that I think about… If she's from some different land across the ocean, that might explain why she's unique. But just maybe it's something more than that. A melody is a song, after all, and the name even starts like*

Meloetta… I was expecting something big and impressive, like Reshiram and Zekrom, but could this be who we're looking for? "Well, it could be that you're a human with amnesia, too?" Cody half stated, half asked. "All us humans showed up in this land at the same time, a few months ago. When did you wake up here?"

"I don't think that could be it," Melody said. "I'm pretty sure I've always been whatever I am, and I've been around for a long time. Much longer than a few months."

Bulbasaur seemed suddenly invigorated as he looked at Cody, finally catching on. Then, turning his attention back to Melody, he asked urgently, "How long?"

Though she'd already revealed so much about herself, Melody seemed hesitant to answer for the first time in the conversation, and her constant swaying stopped momentarily. "It's… It's just been a long time."

"How long of a time?" Bulbasaur insisted.

She looked down at the ground, but didn't respond.

Bulbasaur was about to shout out at her again, but Cody intervened. *If it's really for as long as we think, then…* "Please, Melody, hear us out," Cody said. "We think we might know who you are. We might be able to help you. But that depends on how you answer this question."

Melody looked back up at Cody, her eyes widening. "You're not just saying that? You really think you know who I am?"

Cody nodded. "But you need to answer the question first, before we can really know for sure."

"In that case… Well, I've lost count of the years," she said quietly. "Hundreds, thousands… I'm not sure anymore. I woke up here long before the Guilds ever existed, before even Tornadus, Thundurus,

and Landorus disappeared into legend. I was here when things that even myths have forgotten occurred. Soon after I woke up here, a meteor struck the center of the land, creating a massive crater. If the recent rumors are true, that's where Kyurem was hiding all this time, right? Beneath the Battle Grounds. That's… Actually, that's why I came her tonight. I always thought that the crater could've had something to do with me, since it had happened so soon after I woke up in this land. When I heard that Kyurem was from there and that it had been defeated, I thought maybe, if I came back here, I'd remember something… But so far, nothing. Just glimpses of memory that I can never hold onto for long."

Tears grew in Bulbasaur's eyes and his mouth opened wide in a euphoric smile, but as of yet, he couldn't bring himself to speak.

"What is it?" Melody asked, seeing their expressions. "Do you know who I am, then?"

Cody smiled. "Does the name 'Meloetta' ring a bell at all?"

Melody looked at him for a moment, dumbfounded. Then, all of a sudden, she started to dance from foot to foot. "Yes! Yes yes yes! That's it! That's what I'm called, isn't it? It is, I know it is! And… And… Oh, that did it, that helped! I think it was an… island? An island! Did I live on an island, do you know?"

"Yes, you did!" Bulbasaur burst out. "And if you're Meloetta, then that means you've gotta come with me! We can finally get Vulpix back to normal!" Bulbasaur suddenly dashed off, back the way he and Cody had come. "Come on, come on! We can't wait a second longer!"

Meloetta was so happy that she dashed off after him without a second thought. Cody started off at a run as well, but the energy quickly left him as doubt settled in. *She only just remembered her name, and she barely remembers where she even lived… Will she really be able to help?*

Cody put on a burst of speed and cut in front of Meloetta, forcing them both to a stop. "Meloetta, we need to talk. Please. Because there's more you need to know, and-"

"Come on, guys, hurry up!" Bulbasaur said as he stopped and looked back at them, seeing that they had come to a halt.

"Oh, um, sorry, but I sprained my paw, I think!" Cody said. "But, uh, why don't you go back so you can wake everyone up and tell them the good news? Meloetta and I will just walk back. Okay? This way you can tell Vulpix and the others the good news right away!"

Bulbasaur looked at Cody questioningly, but that last suggestion once again roused all of Bulbasaur's excitement. If he found the sprained paw story somewhat fishy, he no longer cared; he apparently trusted Cody enough to leave Meloetta to his care as he dashed off to be reunited with Vulpix, even if she would still be in her comatose state.

"So? What is it?" Meloetta asked. Her earlier excitement had disappeared, her brows now furrowed with concern.

Cody started walking, saying, "It's just that… You know, Bulbasaur's so happy that he found you, and you're so happy to be finding stuff out about yourself… but I dunno if you guys might both just end up disappointed."

"Why do you say that?" Meloetta asked quietly, as if afraid of the answer.

"It's just that… Kyurem, this whole world being in danger, what happened to Bulbasaur's partner… They're all sort of your fault. Not that anyone would blame you or anything!" Cody quickly added when he saw the shock on Meloetta's face. "I mean, I can't be sure what happened to you, but I think I'm piecing it together… You see, Reshiram and Zekrom themselves sent us to look for you, because they thought you might be able to wake up Vulpix, Bulbasaur's partner - she had her soul eaten by Kyurem or something and hasn't

woken up since. And Reshiram and Zekrom are also worried because they might need help with the distortion left behind from killing Kyurem. If you're really Meloetta, then you used to live on an island south of here and use music or something to help maintain the ancient Rem's power. But after you left, that's when they had to split into Reshiram and Zekrom, and Kyurem was born. You didn't mean for it to happen, I'm sure, but that's how it is."

Meloetta stopped walking and, holding her head in her hands, slowly lowered herself to the ground to sit.

Cody stopped as well, positioning himself in front of her, now almost eye-level with her. "Melody- or, erm, Meloetta? Are you okay?"

"I'm… I'm remembering. Just bits and pieces, but I'm finally remembering," she said, still holding her head in her oblong hands. "I've always liked to sing and dance since I woke up here. I think it came from who I once was. It must've. I'd sing, and the island would sing with me… I was happy back then. That was where I was meant to be, singing for Rem. But why would I leave that?" She took her head out of her hands and looked at Cody, her eyes suddenly seeming thousands of years old. "Why would I leave that? Did Reshiram and Zekrom say?"

Cody shook his head. "They have no idea why you left. They didn't know what happened, but they suddenly couldn't feel your Spirit anymore. They thought you might be dead. But maybe it's like what happened with Vulpix? She completely forgot who she was when she woke up in this world, and I guess it changed her Spirit almost completely. But anyway, I think I might know what happened to you. Why you left."

"What?" Meloetta asked, jumping to her feet. "You have to tell me! I have to know why I'd just abandon everything!"

"All right, calm down, sheesh!" Cody said, unconsciously cringing backwards at the ferocity of her shouting. "You said you were injured when you woke up here, right? Well, when we went to your island to

look for you, there was something really strong and really vicious there. A big purple metal bug. Maybe it injured you so much that the trauma was too much for your body, or it hit your head in just the right way, then knocked you into the ocean… And when you woke up, you had no idea what had happened, due to the shock of it all."

Meloetta cautiously touched a hand to the fractured gem in the center of her forehead. "This… Maybe it was when this got hit. It used to serve as a focus for my psychic powers, but… psychic? But I don't know any psychic moves… Not now… And the island… a barrier…?"

Cody waited patiently for her incoherent musings to stop, trying to put things together for himself. *We still don't know where that bug came from, or why it attacked… It really does look like some sort of robot, though. It couldn't have anything to do with humans, could it? Maybe it's something like yamask, that's born with a connection to the human worlds? Or does it come from a human world…? I've never seen anything like it, but…*

"Cody, tell me… What state was my island in when you were there?"

"Awful," Cody said. "Everything was burned and broken. Nothing was alive, except for some ugly grass and that creature we found."

"Maybe that's it. There's no way I should've forgotten my entire existence. But…" she rubbed the gem on her forehead and closed her eyes, concentrating. "I think I'm tied to that island. If it was wrecked in my battle with that monster, then that mixed with my own injuries would've heightened my mental trauma. And there's something else, too… I'm not as I should be… I'm… Was I different back then…?"

She fell into silence for a time, and Cody didn't bother her, accepting that he probably wasn't going to get to sleep at all tonight. He hoped that maybe, given enough time, she'd remember enough to help Vulpix, and go back to how she was supposed to be. He didn't like

having to guide her through her memory recovery; the more she could figure out on her own, the better.

But before she could have any more revelations, they both heard something to the north of them. The sound was faint, but definite enough that they both turned their heads.

Though it was nearly dawn and the darkness was slowly lessening, Cody could make out a strange shifting of some sort of light somewhere in the distance. It was still too far away to make out any detail, and he almost wasn't sure if he wasn't imagining things, but-

No, there. I definitely saw something. A flare of light into the air? It almost looked like lightning, but there are no clouds…

"Whatever is going on, it's big," Meloetta said. "It's too far away for us to be able to see it otherwise."

Cody's fur bristled. "Yeah. I don't like it. We should hurry back to Bulbasaur and my team. Come on, Meloetta," Cody said as he started down the beach at a brisk walk.

"Right," she said as she followed. "Oh, and… Call me Melody for now. I'm… I'm still not used to thinking of myself as Meloetta yet. Not after so long being just Melody."

Cody didn't acknowledge her and just kept on jogging, and she followed behind without another word. As time passed and the sun began to rise, the faint flashes of light didn't disappear from their view, as they thought they would. Rather, they seemed to be getting brighter and bigger.

Or, more to the point… They're getting closer. But what is it?

Cody could make out two separate sources of light after a time. One was a bright orangey-red, like fire. The other was the one he'd made out earlier, the bright blue-white of what was definitely lightning. Both

were coming from individual, specific points in the sky, or so it seemed to him.

Reshiram and Zekrom? But what are they fighting?

Cody sped up to a flat-out run, and Meloetta didn't complain; perhaps she had some idea of who the two specks in the sky were, and knew that something wasn't right. Soon, they had made it back to the part of the beach were the others were. Vulpix had once again been moved onto Lapras's back. All the others faced north, watching as the storm of fire and electricity drew ever nearer.

"It's Reshiram and Zekrom, isn't it?" Cody gasped when they finally arrived.

"Looks like it," Lisa said.

"Any idea what they're blasting?" Cody asked.

Ryan shook his head, then continued to watch the oncoming fight. "No clue. But it looks like it might be aiming for one of you two - it was originally going more towards where you would've been. It's been moving farther this direction, probably as you got closer. Either it's after the one human left in this land that still has an intact Spirit, or it's after you." Here, he finally turned his head to look at Melody. "Meloetta, I presume? Bulbasaur said that you guys found each other."

Meloetta nodded, adding, "I go by Melody. I… I didn't know my name was Meloetta until these two told me it, so I'd prefer you call me Melody." The kind smile she'd had when first meeting Cody and Bulbasaur had returned, though her new memories kept her more soft-spoken than before.

"So, um, Melody," Bulbasaur said as he rushed up to her. "My friend Vulpix is up on Lapras's back. Can you wake her up? She's been asleep for a long time now-"

"Do you think maybe that should wait?" Isola suggested. "We don't know what might be coming. We should be ready for that."

"But if Vulpix is back awake, she can help us!" Bulbasaur said. "And she's the reason we came all this way, right? So what about it, Melody? Please help her out!"

Meloetta looked over at the comatose figure on Lapras's back. "I'm… I'm not sure if I can. I'll try, but-"

"Try later, looks like we've got company incoming," Lisa said, looking up at the sky as the white speck in the distance began to grow, drawing nearer and nearer with a trail of fire lighting the dim dawn sky behind it. Though he had miles to cover, Reshiram reached the group in what seemed like an impossibly fast time, landing heavily on the ground just in front of the group.

"Meloetta, it *is* you. I can't believe it," was the first thing he said, though his speech seemed rush, making his gladness seem less sincere. "What happened? Only a few hours ago did we feel the whispers of your Spirit again, and even now it seems weak." Bending down closer, he added, "Your appearance has changed as well."

"Has it? I thought so," Meloetta said, standing tall even in the face of such a gargantuan pokémon. "I'm afraid… Oh, seeing you now brings more of it back, but it's still not enough. I've forgotten much of who I was, Reshiram. I'd forgotten all of it for some time now, until these pokémon reminded me. It's a long story, much of which I don't seem to recall."

Reshiram briefly turned his head, looking back at where lightning still flashed. "I'm afraid we don't have time for a long story. The distortion caused by Kyurem expanded past its crater's edge and began turning to ice, spreading outwards in all directions. Zekrom and myself were able to keep it under control, but it sensed you right when we did and focused its energies started moving in this direction. We're slowing it as best you can, but we can't stop it; even

in this form, Kyurem's hunger and power is difficult for us to manage. You *must* get back to your island and sing your song once again, just as you did in ages past. Otherwise, we fear it will go on to engulf the entire land."

"I'm afraid you'll have to think of another way to stop it," Meloetta said. "I've forgotten my song along with everything else."

"Plus, there's a monster on that island of hers," Ryan said. "Even though we'll be ready for it this time, I'm not sure if we'll be able to beat it."

"Says you," Lisa said. "Don't worry, it'll be easy!"

"Regardless of the obstacles, you must make it work, or at least awaken Vulpix," Reshiram said. "Her Spirit's revival might possibly bolster my powers. But it would be best if you could sing once again. The song would chase back the ice itself, and give Zekrom and I enough power to finish it off."

Meloetta closed her eyes briefly. "I'm trying to remember. But… Nothing."

Reshiram opened his wings. "Regardless, all of you must flee from here. Get to Melodic Isle - with any luck, the island will revive your memory. It's our best and only chance. Now, I must go to help Zekrom slow the ice." He flapped his wings, his tail ignited, and he took off.

"Well everyone, in that case, on you get," Lapras said, his dark eyes wide with worry, though he kept his voice perfectly calm. "I'd like to get well away from here before that ice arrives."

Everyone agreed and hurried onto his back. And, as soon as they were on their way back towards Melodic Isle, Cody said quietly, "We'll be backing you up against that monster on the island, Melody. But… If you don't mind me asking, do you think you can do it? Do you think you can remember the song?"

"And can you save Vulpix? Can you wake her up?"

Meloetta looked at all her new traveling companions, her eyes falling last upon Vulpix's limp body in the center of Lapras's back. "On both counts… I don't know. I honestly don't know. But I'll try as best I can."

I did mention that this "post-game" part is really short, right? Because next chapter is the last. Well, then there's an epilogue-y thing, too. But yeah, completion is so close I can taste it. And it tastes like the sweet taste of victory and the savory taste of pokémon-related accomplishment.

In other news, I think I may have forgotten to mention this, but according to my user stats I've archived over a million words on this site as of a couple chapters ago.

WOAH.

I think it's pretty safe to say that I have spent way too much time writing fanfiction over the past few years… That being said, writing fanfiction is also extremely fun and rewarding for me, so I'm okay with that. ^_^ I'll be saying it again upon this fic's completion, but whether you've only recently started reading my works or you've stuck with me for years, thanks to all of you for the wonderful support and critiquing I receive. It makes me feel much more justified about the hundreds of hours sunk into fanfiction writing in the last four years or so.

As always, thanks for reading~!

Chapter 40: Rebirth

Chapter Forty: Rebirth

As the group surfed south yet again, all of them remained silent, their eyes trained upon their newest member as she sat with her eyes closed and her hands laid gently upon Vulpix's head. She'd been sitting like this for nearly an hour now, yet no matter how antsy Lisa was becoming or how bored Cody felt, neither them nor anyone else dared to say a word.

Is she making any progress? Cody wondered as he let his tail drag in the ocean next to them, no longer caring about the wetness. *I don't get any of this Spirit stuff… Well, I guess it's just like believing in souls and stuff in the human world, but you can't see that stuff either. Does Melody even remember enough yet to help?*

Melody slowly withdrew her hands from Vulpix and sat back, leaning against one of Lapras's spike and looking suddenly tired. "I can't sense anything," she said, looking sorrowfully at Bulbasaur. "More memory is still coming back, and more of my original powers, too. I can sense all of your Spirits perfectly well. I can sense pokémon beneath us, living in the ocean for miles around, even though I can't see them. But Vulpix's is just… gone. If not for the fact that I can see her lying here and breathing, I wouldn't even be able to tell she was here. I'm sorry, but I can't find anything to awaken. Nothing at all."

The hopeful expression that Bulbasaur had maintained up until now quickly disappeared. "Surely there's something you can do?"

Meloetta shook her head.

"But… But it can't just end like this!" Bulbasaur shouted, though he immediately seemed to regret yelling. More quietly, he continued, "But I've come all this way. She did so much for everyone, and… You're saying she's just gone? Completely?"

"I'm still missing bits of memory, and I'm still not in the form I should be. There's a chance I'll think of something that can help. But if I can't so much as sense her Spirit, then I don't think there will be anything I can do even then. I'm sorry."

Bulbasaur stared at her, his eyes wide but dry and his whole body drooping, as if he could barely keep himself on his feet. "No… no way. There's gotta be something we can do. We're just missing it."

Meloetta walked over to Bulbasaur, then sat down at his side. "Tell me about her."

Bulbasaur looked up at her uncomprehendingly.

"Melody, maybe now's not a good time," Isola said softly, as if she was hoping Bulbasaur wouldn't hear.

Meloetta acknowledged Isola with a nod, but then turned back to Bulbasaur anyway, placing a hand gently on his bulb. "What was she like, Bulbasaur? I'd like to hear about her… She must've been incredible, for you to want her back so badly."

Bulbasaur looked over at Vulpix. "She was incredible… Really, she was," he started, slowly. "At first she was so shy and scared of everything. I didn't blame her. She didn't remember anything, and on top of that, she hadn't even been a pokémon before then… Not like I knew that at the time. She… I guess I really wasn't a good partner for her. She never could open up to me. Reshiram said she suspected she was going to lose herself in the battle with Kyurem. She never told me that."

"Is it really that she couldn't open up to you?" Melody asked. "I can hardly believe that."

"That's definitely not how it was," Cody suddenly jumped into the conversation. *It's none of my business, but… I think maybe Melody knows what she's doing, trying to get Bulbasaur to talk about her. Maybe it'll help him accept things. He'll never get over it if he keeps*

thinking the reason he couldn't save her was because he wasn't good enough for her. "I've never seen two pokémon trust each other more. So I don't think it's that she didn't trust you. But you know, she was the worst off of all us humans with Kyurem trying to control her and everything, and I never heard her complain even once. She probably just didn't want to worry you, Bulbasaur, or anyone else. She struck me as that sort of person."

"So the complete opposite of you, huh?" Ryan asked Cody, a slight grin on his face despite the seriousness of the situation.

Cody shot a glare at him, but soon found himself grinning slightly, too. "Well, maybe so. No one ever would've heard the end of it if I'd been that bad off."

"That sounds like the sort of pokémon you're trying to save, Bulbasaur," Melody said with a calming smile. "Not one who can't trust you, but one who trusts you so much that she'd suffer by herself rather than see you suffer. What else was she like?"

"She was scared of water," Lisa said, though she didn't say it with the scorn she might've. *She respects Vulpix… I think she always wanted to have a battle with her. See who would come out on top.*

Still, despite her neutral tone, Bulbasaur took offense. "But she never let that stop her! I've never met someone as determined as her. No matter how impossible things seemed, she never gave up. I need to be like that, too… I can't give up. Not now. But… but…"

Bulbasaur bit back whatever he was about to say and fell completely silent, his eyes looking blankly forward, registering nothing. He stayed like that for long minutes, and Melody stayed at his side, her hand still resting gently against his bulb, the best support she could give him at that moment.

But after some time had passed, Cody saw the glimmer of tears streaming down not Bulbasaur's face, but rather Meloetta's. And it

was at that moment that he couldn't stay silent any longer. "Melody… Are you crying…?"

Removing her hand from Bulbasaur, she wiped the tears from her face. Solemnly, she explained, "When I am in my natural form, my songs can influence the emotions of others, much as any well-sung melody can. I can't do that in this form…" She turned to look down at Bulbasaur. "But I can still sense others' emotions, even now. Bulbasaur, I'm so sorry. I wish I could help Vulpix. I really do, now more than ever."

Bulbasaur managed to regain his composure, and he sat up straight once again. "I know. It's not your fault… You even have problems of your own, and your still trying to help me out. But now… I just don't know how to take all this in. I'd go to the ends of the earth for Vulpix, but what hope would I have now? Reshiram and Zekrom themselves suggested that I go to you, and now you say you can't help her. Who else can I turn to? What else can I do?"

Lisa suddenly got to her feet, clearly fed up with all the tears and emotions. "Frankly, I don't see why you're even worrying about that right now. Did you forget about the ice that's growing on the mainland? Do we even know if the ocean was going to stop it, or is it still chasing us? You're worrying about your partner who apparently didn't fix much of anything. Kyurem being dead doesn't help at all if we all still get turned into blocks of ice. And Melody, do you even remember that stupid song of yours yet so we can stop it?"

Meloetta looked at Lisa calmly, despite her harsh words. "You're right. We should be focusing on that for now… Bulbasaur, there's nothing more I can do for Vulpix, or for you." She sighed, then stood up, her eyes dry once again. "In answer to your question, Lisa… No, I haven't remembered my song yet. That's the key to everything - me changing back to how I should be, my island going back to how it should be. I think being back on my island will help to spur my recollections."

"But that involves dealing with that monster again," Cody said. "That didn't go too well last time, burned fur on my back as proof."

"But you'll be ready this time, and you have me," Meloetta said. "My power isn't what it once was, but I'm no pushover, either. If we can defeat it, I'll be able to sit and concentrate while once again on my island. That's our best bet for me to remember the song and fix everything." Turning to Bulbasaur, she added, "You don't have to fight with us, if you're not up for it. You can stay here with Lapras and Vulpix until all this is decided, one way or another."

Much to everyone's surprise, Bulbasaur got to his feet. In a solemn but resolute voice, he responded, "I'll fight. I won't let any bit of Kyurem survive, whether it's living or just ice or anything."

"Getting revenge on what's left of Kyurem for killing of your partner?" Lisa asked with a smirk. "I can dig it."

Bulbasaur shook his head and, more surprising even than before, he let out a sound that was half sob and half laugh, a noise so pitiful that Cody imagined that even the waves grew silent for the briefest of moments in respect for the poor little bulbasaur who had lost so much, and yet who still had so much more to face. "Not revenge, no," Bulbasaur said, looking back off behind them, where Lapras's wake trailed behind her. "But if Vulpix really is gone - or even if she isn't - I can't let everything she did be in vain. She was willing to give everything to protect this land. So for her sake, I'll protect this land, too."

Lisa scoffed. "Sure you ain't just gonna run from a teensy bit of fire again?"

Bulbasaur turned to face her. "No," he said, with absolutely no hesitation in his voice. "I won't run. Not ever again."

To the left of the group, the sea exploded in a cloud of steam and boiling water as a beam of energy hit it, yet Lapras barely winced,

only swerving a bit to avoid the seething ocean. Lapras was charging ahead, a determined glint in his eyes. His passengers had more or less the same look about them, though with other emotions flooding through their bodies as well. Ryan and Isola shared that same determination; Cody looked anxious; Bulbasaur flinched at the blast, still unable to avoid his instinctual fear of the fiery beam; and Lisa, of course, only smiled as they passed through the resulting steam, enthusiasm filling her limbs with energy.

"Looks like it spotted us," Lapras said. "Ryan, are you ready?"

Ryan jumped up onto Lapras's head, holding onto his horn for stability. "You've got the first one, right?"

"Yes," he replied. And, seeing that the next beam was already charging and aimed straight for the group, he let out a call, and the air in front of the group shimmered with energy, distorting their view. His protect technique came none too soon, for it had barely flickered into existence before the searing beam exploded against the barrier, bits of the blast diverting down into the ocean as well as into the air all around them.

"Looks like the plan to get close is working," Isola said as Ryan and Lapras began their swapping of turns, using protect time after time. "I just wish we hadn't needed it… Things would've been simpler if it'd fallen asleep again before we got here."

"That's true," Melody said. "But seeing it awake - not just it, but my island, too - it's bringing back more. More memory. And… Oh, that poor thing…"

Cody looked at her, frowning. "Poor thing? You talking about the raging monster up ahead?"

Meloetta nodded. "Its Spirit has been twisted almost beyond recognition, tortured… Something or someone changed it, and it got trapped in that metal body it has. Its Spirit is so suppressed… It has

no thought but of violence now. There's no way even I could get through to it, even with the proper song."

"But how'd something like that happen?" Lisa asked.

Melody rubbed her head. "I think… I remember a tear in dimensions. Something very small… Because of how much power is in this island, small things could sometimes fall through from other places. Usually it would just be a brief glimpse or sound from another world, but this time, that thing came through. With as much power as it had back then, I wouldn't be surprised if it had found a weakness in its own dimension and torn its way through. We fought… But I don't think I was doing very well. Rarely had I battled before, and never against something that could come close to matching my strength. Then…" she trailed off, the recollection apparently ending there.

"What about the barrier keeping it in the island?" Isola suggested. "It couldn't follow us last time, even if it can swim at all."

"That's right… I put up the barrier, to drain its power and keep it here. It didn't have the immediate effect I wanted so that I could finish it off, though it seems much weaker now than before. And then… Putting up the barrier drained my psychic powers, so I changed… That's right! I changed into this form to fight it better!" Melody said with sudden excitement, looking down at herself. "And after that… after that…"

Without consciously thinking about it, she raised a hand to the crystal on her head.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she said, "But after that, it all goes fuzzy. I think… I know that this gem is the focus of my psychic powers, and thus my tie to the island. And that island is my entire purpose for existing. Looking at the island itself, and the damage that was done to my gem… It's no wonder I lost my memory for so long."

"As much as I like hearing this trip down memory lane," Cody spoke up, "we're almost there."

"Is everyone ready?" Lapras said. "It's almost too shallow for me to swim. You'll have to get off soon."

In response, everyone except Ryan moved themselves to the left side of Lapras's back.

"Okay then," Lapras said. "Ready…"

Not twenty feet away, light shone in the barrel of the insect's canon.

"Set… "

Ryan's protect just barely held against the force of the close-range blast, the energy barrier shattering apart and the hot air of the resulting explosion washing over Lapras and his occupants. At the same time, a light shone from within the cloud of steam that surrounded them, a bright point of blue-white at the tip of Lapras's horn.

"Go!"

In a single fluid movement, Lapras launched his ice beam attack and swerved to the right. The monster froze over in the area of its chest and head, stunning it for just long enough for the others to jump off, propelled by their momentum past the reeling creature, almost making it completely out of the shallow water and onto the beach itself. Lisa was the only one to fail in making it that far, but for good reason. To no one's surprise, she opted to use her momentum to launch her first attack, her flaming fist hitting the machine-like creature in the head, causing it to stumble backwards.

Despite this unplanned attack, she did stick to the only other part of the plan there was left to do; with the creature momentarily taking time to recover from both the ice and the fire, the rest of the group ran inland, getting far away from the shore. If they wound up fighting in the water, even the shallowest waves could pose a problem for those among them who were lowest to the ground.

Well, here goes nothing! Cody thought as he decided to be the first one to turn around and stand his ground, deciding for everyone that they were far enough inland already. Whether the others agreed with him or not, they followed suit, spreading out instinctually so that they weren't a single large target.

They turned around just in time to see the creature let out a roar like the scraping of metal on metal as it ran towards them, the single sharp claws of its arms outstretched.

Worried though he was, the slightest hint of a smile crept its way onto Cody's face. *We're ready for you this time!* he thought as he launched a thunderbolt simultaneously with a water pulse from Ryan and a barrage of razor leaves from Bulbasaur. The creature didn't so much as stumble, and in another moment, the more physical attackers had fallen into place, and the real battle began in a frantic whirlwind of close-range attacks. Isola dove in with a drill peck, aiming for the thin part where the creature's arm met up with its body; Lisa, sticking to her seemingly successful fire attack, stayed low to the ground and fire punched the monster in the leg, knocking it off balance enough for Meloetta to jump in, spin once midair, and lash out with her foot using her momentum, knocking the creature to the ground.

The creature didn't stay down long, though, firing out a blast even as it got to its feet; it hit no one, but successfully kept them at bay, giving it time to launch itself forward, slashing out with a claw. Lisa was forced to jump back, and Isola was caught off guard, the feathers on one side of her body suddenly turning dark with blood. Cody and Ryan both jumped in to defend her before the monster could strike again, Cody with a headbutt that did next to nothing and Ryan with a tail-slap attack, which likewise did little but distract it.

Meloetta, on the other hand, had somehow managed to jump over the previous slash attack and, with the prowess and grace that Cody thought might only be equaled by a ninja with a passion for dance, she launched into a series of punches, always swaying or pirouetting

just out of reach whenever the increasingly violent creature lashed out at her.

Her distraction gave the others the chance to get back into the fight, though Isola now only went in when she was sure the bug's attention was entirely on someone else; the wound she had received was deep, and her agility was leaking further with every drop of blood that trickled from her sodden feathers.

The battle continued on, and for a while, Cody was impressed with the rhythm the group was falling into, always knowing when to attack and when to let someone else in. But, when Cody withdrew from storm of battle momentarily to catch his breath, he saw that things weren't going as well as he might've hoped. In addition to Isola, Ryan had been cut up fairly badly; either that, or his shallower wounds from the previous battle with this creature had reopened. Either way, he was clearly flagging, his attacks doing even less damage to the armored creature than before. Lisa, not knowing when to hold back on attacking, went in for another fire punch attack, only to have the creature turn towards her, its canon charging; Meloetta tried to knock the attack off course, but Lisa was too close. The little kangaskhan had enough sense to turn her back to it at the last minute, just in time for her to be blasted backwards, her back and left side visibly charred despite her usually fire-resistant tough hide.

She got right up again and launched herself into battle, but even she could ignore the pain and damage only so much; she battled just as ferociously as before, but without the energy she needed to back it up.

Bulbasaur remained undamaged, being not nearly agile enough to attempt to come in for close-contact battle. Instead, he stayed close at hand, interfering with the creature's movements using his vines and attacking with razorleaf whenever he had a clear shot. Meloetta, though likewise undamaged, was in quite the opposite situation, never taking more than a step back from the creature, her eyes fierce with a desire to win matched only by the look on Bulbasaur's

own face. Fragile though she looked, she took hits in stride, perhaps in part because her dancing around meant that the worst damage she'd received were various shallow cuts scattered across her body and a portion of her hair completely burned away. Strands of hair fell down around her head messily, making her appear somewhat lopsided but no less graceful or fearsome as she battled.

But no matter what we do, we're barely doing anything, Cody thought. *We barely even scratch the armor, not to mention hurt the thing inside it. It just won't go down. Even so…* His eyes fell first to Meloetta, then to Bulbasaur. *Even so, I suppose I can't just give up.*

He began to ready a thunderbolt attack, only to become distracted as he became aware of something out of the corner of his eyes. He turned his head momentarily, expecting the sight to be just a wailmer surfacing in the distance or something else insignificant.

Instead, all the electricity left his fur as he saw an unnatural stillness of water in the distance, a place where the ocean seemed to cease and jagged spikes rose in its place. It was still too far away for Cody to see it well, but he had no doubt that it was the advancing ice; it seemed as if Reshiram and Zekrom had been unable to stop it, and now that it was past the boundary of the mainland, neither legend was present to slow its progress. With the threat of the robot bug so close at hand, no one else had yet noticed the nearing danger.

"Everyone!" Cody shouted worriedly. "We have to finish this fast! The ice is coming!"

Cody immediately regretted blurting out the news, urgent though it was. Because as soon as he drew his teammate's attention to the oncoming threat, they became less focused on the threat at hand for just a moment. And for several already injured pokémon, one moment was all the creature needed. It managed to knock Meloetta away with an arm, then proceeded to fire its canon in a wide arc, managing to hit Isola, Lisa, and Ryan all in one go. All three were knocked far backwards, their flash-burned bodies smoking faintly as they slid to a stop. Isola and Ryan were unconscious long before

coming to a stop; Lisa kept her eyes open and tried to push herself back upwards, but all she could manage was getting to her knees.

"Guys!" Cody shouted angrily as he instinctually ran forward, wanting to get the monster back for what it had done to his team. But the monster of course heard him and took aim, its canon glowing once again. Cody quickly tried to do what zigzagoon do best and zag out of the way, which worked with some success. Instead of his whole body getting hit, only his right shoulder and front leg felt the blast; the rest of the blast exploded against the ground, sending him skidding backwards.

Bulbasaur and Meloetta took up the battle again soon, giving Cody the chance to get back to his feet, albeit with one less foot than before. His right front leg was totally useless and in terrible pain, and he didn't trust himself to battle anymore, not now that he was so handicapped. He could stay at a distance, and he could probably still manage water pulses and thunderbolts…

But… His turned to look north once again. The advancing ice had drawn ever nearer; in the late day sun, Cody could even see the ice, an unnatural, glittering stillness where there should only have been the ever-shifting waves of a boundless ocean.

Cody shook his head and turned back to the battle. *We have to focus on this first, otherwise there's nothing we can do about the ice,* he thought as he finally loosed a thunderbolt. But, as before, it did little good, the creature hardly even noticing the attack. What was worse, Cody could see that now that the rest of his team had fallen, the battle was quickly becoming worse. A deep slash now scored the side of Meloetta's face, for even she was unable to avoid all the monster's attacks now that the others could no longer distract him. And as Cody watched, Bulbasaur wrapped his vines around an arm in order to hinder the creature's next attack only to find himself yanked forward, the canon aimed at him.

His eyes wide with terror, Bulbasaur loosed his grip and tried to dodge, but his bulb was still hit almost in its entirety. He cried out in

pain as the leaves protecting the bulb practically vaporized in places and thick, transparent sap dripped down onto his body in sticky globs.

What can we do? Cody thought as Meloetta once again took up the fight, dodging slashes and blasts alike as she desperately tried to land a blow that could do something to harm this monstrosity. *But what* is *there to do? Isola and Ryan are down, Lisa's too hurt to even get over here, Meloetta's keeping pace but is barely able to do anything, Bulbasaur won't be able to do much more, and I…*

Cody's thoughts trailed off in amazement as a volley of razor leaves hit the monster, and he looked over to see Bulbasaur on his feet, his eyes glazed over and his bulb wilting badly, yet firing off his leaves with the same intensity as he had before. As he ceased the razor leaf attack to let Meloetta back into the fight, Cody saw Bulbasaur's eyes darting to the flames on the ground to either side of him, which had been growing and spreading throughout the course of the battle as more and more canon blasts hit the scraggly grass and dead trees around them. Yet the fear that filled his eyes lasted only a moment. Cody watched as the Bulbasaur took a deep breath and, ignoring his fears, turned his attention back to the bug.

That bulbasaur is crazy. But… if he's crazy enough not to give in just yet, then I can be that crazy, too. There's got to be some weak point, something we can hit that would get through the armor or knock the armor apart. We've hit all its joints, we've tried the head and eyes. The canon getting hit hasn't done anything to it, and it can't be much of a weak point anyway… Could it?

An idea came to Cody, something that he'd noticed earlier but had nearly forgotten in the heat of battle. At the top of the canon's base, seemingly out of place amongst the purple of the rest of the creature's body, was a red block inserted into the back of the actual blasting part of the canon. Cody kept his eyes trained on it, and hope soared through him as he saw the red cartridge-like block glow slightly brighter as the creature fired off another blast of fiery energy.

Yes! I mean, it's a long shot, but if that thing is significant, maybe we can do something to it and… Oh, no.

His revelation had perhaps come too late. Meloetta hadn't been able to dodge the last blast completely, an arm getting caught in the beam. Though it was hard to tell exactly how badly damaged her already black arm was, it now hung limply at her side, as completely useless as Cody's own burned leg.

Cody tensed, his fur spiking out defiantly, electricity once again surging through it and electrifying every jagged bit of fur he had. *No! It's not over yet!*

"The red thing on its canon!" Cody shouted as he loosed the thunderbolt and ran forward on three legs. Just as Cody wanted, his attack distracted the monster from finishing off Meloetta as it turned to face him instead.

Cody braced himself for the worst as he saw the creature lower its canon, but he didn't swerve away. He had to make this distraction count. Instead, he shouted out again, "Aim for the red thing! It might be a weak point!"

Cody dodged at the very last moment, somehow managing to miss the majority of the blast, though the force of the ground as it exploded beneath him sent him arcing into the air. He thought heard a cracking noise as he hit the ground, and felt sure that some ribs had snapped, but he didn't care anymore.

Chasing stars from his vision, he lifted his head to see that his words had not gone unheeded. Before the creature could turn around to face its true opponent again, Meloetta had already leapt high into the air, reaching her peak not far above the creature's canon and crashing down atop it, putting all her momentum into a powerful thrust of her single good hand.

There was a small sound of fracturing, and even from his distance Cody could see a slight glow emanating from the hairline cracks that

had appeared on the cartridge. The screeching, metallic roar of the monster filled the air as it swung its body violently in reaction to the apparent pain it felt, throwing Melody roughly to the ground. The roar was still sounding as the depths of the canon glowed with a new blast, the screeching metal piercing Cody's ears as the monster aimed at Melody, who was still too stunned by the fall and her previous injuries to get out of the way.

Cody managed to scrunch his eyes closed and look away right as the roar cut off, suddenly replaced by the booming of the canon attack. When he worked up the courage to look back over, he saw Melody sprawled in the distance; he couldn't make out how badly hurt she was, only that she seemed to be unconscious. Cody was quickly distracted from that sight, though, when there was the sound of energy escaping from the canon, though without the usual accompanying explosion of it making contact with ground or pokémon. He looked over and saw the last bit of the beam of red energy disappear into the air, apparently aimed at nothing.

The creature roared again at nothing in particular, and at the same time another blast rent the air, meeting nothing but sky. And soon after that, another beam followed. And another, and another, each beam shorter but no less powerful than the last.

It just… it just made things worse, Cody thought as he watched the creature once again lock onto Melody's limp figure and begin to rush towards her, canon still going off erratically every few seconds. *The canon's messed up now, firing even if that pokémon doesn't want it to. And Melody, she's… She's in danger! I've got to do something!*

Cody opened his mouth and took a deep breath, intending to call out, to draw the creature's attention, to do *anything* ; after all, at least he could still dodge and run, albeit without the use of one leg. Melody, on the other hand, was absolutely helpless. But right as the words to taunt the creature away from Melody were rising in his throat, another sound cut through the air: the whizzing of razor-sharp leaves as they flew towards the metal insect.

Despite the badly burned bulb, despite the clear pain on Bulbasaur's face that he could no longer hide, and despite the sap-like fluid still oozing down his sides, Bulbasaur stood tall and kept on firing off his barrage, the leaves escaping from just beneath his bulb and twirling through the air in a deadly flock. Only one or two hit their mark from such a distance, and those that hit did next to nothing to the armor plating. Still, the creature noticed, and it turned back around to face its new attacker, its canon going off in the process and hitting the ground not far from Bulbasaur, causing earth and bits of singed and burning grass to rain down on top of him.

Yet as these embers fell around him and as the metal creature charged towards him, Cody couldn't see a shred of fear in the bulbasaur. Blast after blast hit the ground around him as the monster attempted to aim as it ran, but rather than flee or cower, Bulbasaur instead ceased his razor leaf attack and charged forward himself, running to meet the threat.

Using the breath that he'd originally intended for Melody's aid, Cody shouted, "Bulbasaur!" He couldn't be sure what he intended to achieve by the yell - perhaps to encourage Bulbasaur in the face of such an unbeatable foe, or to warn him against sacrificing his life like this. Because that was all Cody could see in the situation.

There… Oh, there's gotta be something else we can do, but I don't know what! But Bulbasaur, he can't just risk everything in one attack, not when nothing works! It's suicide, especially for a grass type against a fire-based beam attack!

Regardless, neither Bulbasaur nor the creature paid Cody's shout any mind as they drew nearer to one another, the beam's impacts growing closer and closer to Bulbasaur, who ran on undaunted. The two pokémon were barely fifteen feet away when the creature finally pulled to a stop and took aim, apparently intending to finish Bulbasaur with a single, close-range blast.

Even then, Bulbasaur charged forward. In the precious moments it took the creature to charge its now unpredictable beam and take

aim, Bulbasaur had closed the distance between them. Yet rather than use his momentum in a full tackle attack, as Cody expected, he instead dug his feet into the ground at the last minute, so that Bulbasaur instead found himself looking down the glowing barrel of the canon at point-blank range.

As Cody watched in the last few moments, everything moved so fast without seeming to move at all, allowing the him to catch every little progression of the face-off. Cody saw the determined gleam in Bulbasaur's eyes, that shine of devotion to a course of action that he deemed worth sacrificing his own life to pull off. He saw the wilting bulb on Bulbasaur's back suddenly puff up, as if some internal pressure was straining to escape from the tattered outer leaves. He saw the glow of the insect's canon increase to the point that it seemed blinding. And, just before the beam could be loosed, Cody just barely managed to see a little dot of something blast out of the tip of Bulbasaur's bulb and zoom into the canon like a bullet.

In the moment following the speck's successful entrance into the now fully-charged canon, Cody had time to think only one thing.

A… seed?

A boom rang out through the air, but it wasn't caused by the creature's attack successfully hitting Bulbasaur or, for that matter, the attack getting launched at all. Instead, the concussive explosion that traveled through the air came from within the creature's own canon as the tiny kernel of a seed bomb attack exploded, causing the imminent blast to backfire within the canon. A flash of light and fire just barely escaped from the canon's mouth, followed immediately by plumes of black smoke as the creature stood completely still, as if frozen in place.

Bulbasaur stood tensely, facing down the motionless creature while long seconds passed. And Cody found that he, too, was on his three working feet, ready to jump into action if there was anything he could do to aid Bulbasaur.

Their mutual caution was unnecessary. The slightest of breeze came from the south, ruffling Cody's fur and the tatters of Bulbasaur's bulb; the breeze caused the creature to teeter stiffly for a few seconds, as if still clinging to the possibility of continuing to destroy, the only thing it had known for age upon age. Then, Bulbasaur just barely managed to get out of the way as the creature toppled forward and became nothing more than a smoking heap of metal on the battle-torn ground.

The stillness broken, Cody rushed forward as fast as his three functioning legs could carry him. "Is it dead?"

Bulbasaur took a deep, steadying breath, then replied, "Yes, I think so. But if we've just stunned it… We need to hurry." He turned to look northward, and Cody followed his gaze to see that the ice was clearly in sight now, glacial crystal jutting upward and forward on the ocean's surface, with more continually building off of the front of it, bringing the entire path of ice every closer. Cody guessed it was only two miles away. He didn't know how long that gave them, but judging by the rate at which ice was building, it wasn't long.

Bulbasaur suddenly took off at a run towards Meloetta, but Cody hesitated before following, casting a glance over to see how his injured teammates were doing. Lisa was back on her feet, and both Ryan and Isola were at least conscious again, sitting upright on the ground.

Ryan saw Cody's look and gestured over to Bulbasaur and Meloetta, shouting, "We're fine!"

"Then get over to Lapras! We might have to make a quick escape!" Cody yelled back before limping over to Bulbasaur and Meloetta, the latter of whom was just coming to her senses when Cody arrived. As bad as Bulbasaur looked right now, Meloetta looked bad even compared to him. Her pale face was now dark with burns, her wounds ugly scabs of blackened blood; what was left of her hair was so brittle that rising to a sitting position caused strands to crumble, falling to join the charred ground below. One eye she could barely

open, one arm wasn't moving at all, and the jewel on her forehead was missing entire fragments of itself.

As she looked over to Bulbasaur and Cody, she asked in barely more than a whisper, "Did we do it?"

Bulbasaur nodded. "We think so, but we don't have much time. The ice is coming. Now that the creature won't disturb us, can you remember your song and stop it?"

She put her good hand to her jewel and shook her head. "I… I don't know. Can you help me to the mound of earth in the center of the island?"

Bulbasaur held out his vines and, using his own waning reserves of strength, helped her to her feet and half helped, half carried her to the nearby mound. Cody, too short for her to lean on, simply walked alongside, wondering if there was time for this or if they should all make their escape from the island while they still could.

Once atop the mound, Meloetta sat in silence, her eyes closed and her head bowed towards the broken remnants of the natural orchestra of the island. Very occasionally, she would hum a note or two in contemplation, but otherwise she made no acknowledgment of Bulbasaur and Cody as they stood at the base of the mind, their gazes moving back and forth nervously between her and the ice.

A mile left between us and the ice, at best, Cody thought. *Everyone else is back on Lapras, and they're on the south side of the island, ready to escape… Lapras should be able to outswim the ice, at least until he gets too exhausted to go on. But we need to get out of here, soon. If we wait until the last moment, it might overtake us before we can even get to Lapras. I'm not at all confident in how fast we can move right now.*

"… I'm sorry," Melody eventually said, her eyes still closed and head still bowed. Yet even though Cody couldn't really see her face, he could hear the trembling of her voice and see her tears hitting the

ground. "Nothing. I can remember old songs, but the land of the now - a land still under threat by Kyurem in the form of this ice, a land that perhaps has no hope - I can't even begin to think of how to sing that song. It used to come so naturally, but in this current form of mine, with the island so destroyed…"

For the first time since before his final face-of with the metal monster, Bulbasaur's eyes opened wide with fear. Or maybe it was something else, something that Cody couldn't quite pinpoint. "There's… Nothing… Nothing we can do? Nothing to jog your memory?"

"How things are now, it could take me years to piece the song together," Melody said.

Bulbasaur took a step back, slowly shaking his head as he looked at Melody pleadingly. "No… no way," he said. "We've got to… We have to stop the ice! Because if it's still spreading on the mainland, then everyth-" he broke off, took a breath, then continued even louder than before, "then everything Vulpix lived for will have been for nothing!"

"I'm sorry," Melody said, her whole body trembling. "I'm sorry. I'm scared and I'm in pain and I'm sorry, and I want to do something to save this island, to save myself, to save the land… But there's nothing that can be done."

There was a brief silence, but Cody broke it as he started off towards Lapras, saying, "Then we've got to get out of here, or the ice will get us soon. Let's go." He continued walking forward, but stopped when he heard no affirmation, nor any sound of footsteps following him. He turned to see both Melody and Bulbasaur were looking at him, but neither had moved from their positions at all; and once he caught their gazes, they both looked to the ground, as if in shame.

"Come on, we can worry about this later!" Both continued to look at the ground, and Cody's fur bristled; the ice was drawing ever nearer, as he was painfully aware. It could be only a mile away now, at best. "Come *on*, we've got to…" A realization hit him, and he looked at the

pair of them in disbelief. "You aren't… You two aren't just going to sit here and let the ice get you, are you?"

Neither pokémon answered.

"You're both insane!" Cody shouted at them, moving back over to them. "I won't let you both just die for nothing! Melody, if you can escape the ice, then maybe there'll be a chance for the future, don't you think?"

She slowly lifted her head and, after looking into Cody's eyes for a long while, she struggled to her feet. "You're right… There's always a chance."

Cody turned to look at Bulbasaur. "And you, Bulbasaur, you-"

"I know," Bulbasaur interrupted, meeting Cody's eyes just as Melody had. "I won't die here. As tempting as it is, if Vulpix can never be with me again…" He trailed off and half managed to choke back a sudden sob. Then, composing himself, he continued, "I need to live on. Even if there's no hope… It's… It's what Vulpix would have wanted."

"Right, then let's hurry," Cody said as he led the way, this time aware of the sound of two sets of feet following behind.

The ice was still perhaps a half mile away from the north shore of the island when Cody, Melody, and Bulbasaur climbed onto Lapras's back and he took off, speeding across the top of the ocean, heading straight south so as to put as much distance between themselves and the ice as possible. Yet though they had been victorious against what had seemed like an unbeatable enemy, and though all of them had miraculously survived, not even Lisa dared to say a word to break the somber mood that fell upon the group.

No one died, we've stopped that bug in case we ever need to come back here, and Melody says there could be a chance at one day stopping this ice… We should be happy, or at least satisfied with what we've done… So why does it just feel like we're in mourning?

He knew the answer even before he looked over to Melody, who was now completely still, her eyes staring off at the home she had only just discovered after thousands of years gone. She was a protector of this world, but she had failed it for thousands of years and now, at the time of greatest need, she hadn't been able to do her part. And she wasn't the only one in mourning. Bulbasaur was sitting at Vulpix's side, and though not a single tear clouded his eyes, the sense of loss hung in the air, making it heavy even as they sped through the salty sea breezes.

The silence persisted for only a short time, though. Before the island had shrunk much into the distance, a quavering of Bulbasaur's voice filled the air, like a drawn-out sob or a sentence stifled and distorted by a sorrow that no amount of tears could ever express. Cody drew closer to Bulbasaur, ready to ask him to repeat what he was saying. But the utterance, whatever it was, didn't stop. Instead, it grew stranger as his tone slipped up and down, and Cody realized that he wasn't trying to form words at all. And when Bulbasaur took a brief breath and continued somewhat louder and more confidently than before, Cody finally understood.

It's a song… A sad song, he thought. *Like a funeral song… but also not quite. Is it some tradition among pokémon? Instead of funerals, they sing, maybe…* He looked over to his team to see if they could give him some sort of confirmation, but if they knew the wordless melody, they gave no sign of recognition.

Whatever it was, Bulbasaur's voice grew stronger as he went on, the slow, haunting melody drifting out over the waves as the island became smaller and the ocean seemed to grow bigger, as if ready to swallow the group up in an act of mercy, so as to bring an end to the great sadness.

After a couple phrases of the tune were through, Cody became aware of a thin, high voice joining in, and he looked over to see that Melody was singing, though her eyes remained trained on the island behind them. She sang so quietly that Cody wasn't even sure she knew she was singing, and this suspicion was confirmed when,

without missing a note, she suddenly looked over to Bulbasaur, her eyes wide.

And as Bulbasaur's voice grew louder and more confident, so too did her own voice become more vibrant and beautiful, filling in the song with elegant vibratos and more complex tonal structures, as if she was giving shape to the raw material of note and rhythm that Bulbasaur had provided. Though Bulbasaur was no great singer, his voice seemed to meld perfectly with hers as the song progressed, the melody that they formed together so engrossing that Lapras unconsciously slowed to a stop and not a pokémon on his back even noticed.

It wasn't a long song, though, and after about a minute, the voices softened over the course of one final phrase before vanishing into nothing, the last couple of notes swallowed completely by the sound of the waves around them.

Audible or not, it wasn't until the duet had finished entirely that Melody jumped up and rushed over to Bulbasaur, kneeling at his side, her voice at once both mystified and excited as she asked, "Bulbasaur, that song - how could you possibly know that song?"

Bulbasaur seemed stunned; Cody got the feeling he hadn't even realized that Melody had joined in his dirge. "It was something Vulpix would sometimes hum. She sang it for me when we visited my parents' bodies… It seemed right to sing it for her now."

"Bulbasaur, you don't get it, do you?" Melody said as she suddenly sprang to her feet, using what had been her injured arm to swing around a spike, all function apparently returned to it despite the fact that it still looked withered. "Lapras, turn around and head back as fast as you can! I have to get back to my island, because - oh, Bulbasaur, that's it! I can't believe it, but that's the song I needed, the song of this land! She must've… Of course, Vulpix's own Spirit had already been wiped clean of memories, and she had her connection to Reshiram - she must've latched onto the song without even thinking about it!"

As Lapras promptly turned around and sped off at a pace somehow even faster than before, Bulbasaur still seemed dumbstruck as he looked down at his partner. "She… Vulpix's song? That's what you needed?"

"Yes yes yes yes yes!" Melody shouted joyously. "Now if we can only get back before the ice covers the island, then - oh, we've still got a chance! We can stop it, right now! Lapras, please hurry! Everything depends on it!"

Lapras went faster still, and Bulbasaur's eyes watered. "So even when… Even when she's gone for good, she's still… Vulpix, even now, you're saving the world." Yet, rather than cry as the tears building in his eyes suggested, Bulbasaur a big, genuine smile grew on Bulbasaur's face. "Vulpix… You really were the most amazing pokémon I've ever met."

If Bulbasaur had more to say, it was lost as Lapras practically crashed into the shore. Yet the jerk that threw all of his occupants off balance had no such affect on Meloetta as she leapt off his back and ran as fast as she could, her charcoal hair practically disintegrating as the air blew past her face.

And it was not without necessity that she ran. The ice had branched out upon reaching the island so that it was now eating away at both ends of the power-filled island at once, with a full half of the island already gone, and the middle section disappearing quickly as spire after spire of ice shot outward, first pulverizing what was left of the natural instruments of the island before encasing them completely. If anything, with Melody's arrival, the ice seemed to speed up, hungry still for the living gem that would complete the meal it was making of the island.

Cody, Bulbasaur, and all the others watched wordlessly as Meloetta seemed to fly over the ground, and watched in horror as the center part of the island devoid of ice grew narrower and narrower. Melody was only halfway to the mound at the center of the island when the first of the ice spikes began to reach her path, yet she dodged above

and below and between them with the same lithe grace she had demonstrated in battle earlier. Yet the pathway she had was quickly becoming narrower, and more and more crystal spikes of ice jetted out at her from either side, slowing her.

It was only when a particularly large ice spike just in front of Lapras blocked their view of Meloetta that, no longer transfixed by her perilous run, Bulbasaur shouted, "Melody! You can do it! Please, do it for Vulpix!"

Joining right on in despite the fact that the path was now barely wider than Lapras was long, and despite the fact that what little was left of the path must now be nearly completely barred by spikes like bars stretching from side to side along the entirety of Melody's gauntlet, Cody shouted, "Go, Melody! You're not allowed to fail after so much work!"

Soon, it wasn't just Cody and Bulbasaur shouting out. Though they had no way of knowing whether or not she had been incapacitated by the encroaching ice, Lapras and the rest of Team Misfits joined in the chorus, doing the only thing the could to support Melody. They continued cheering as loud as they could even when Lapras was forced backwards from the beach, the ice path now no wider than he was. And they continued to cheer up until the two main walls of ice joined together completely, and it was only at that point that all their cheering promptly cut off.

They waited. They heard ice still cracking and growing up ahead; perhaps there was still a path somewhere up there, perhaps Melody was still alive. Perhaps she would make it through.

They waited, but Lapras was forced farther back as the ice suddenly began to jut outwards from the ice, expanding at the edges as if it hoped to spread from this point all across the world.

It was only when the hope on their faces was beginning to fade and no one dared to say what they all were thinking that Cody heard a faint sound rising above the constant fracturing and shifting of the

growing ice. But the sound grew quickly, so that soon, all could hear Vulpix's song rising above the newly formed wasteland as the icy growth came to a complete halt.

The softer notes of the entrance faded, and suddenly, as the louder tones of a new phrase of song began, there was a huge cracking noise as the ice at the center of the island exploded into a haze of tiny crystals, light refracting off of every single one of them, rays of sun dancing between them as if in time to the song. And with each new note, new ice flew into the air, expanding farther outward until, finally, as the song came to an end, the final layer of ice between the group and Melody disintegrated, giving them full view of her tiny yet victorious figure standing atop her conductor's stand.

They didn't go to her, not wanting to interrupt as she began the song again. Yet it wasn't the same song as before, not exactly. A chord here sounded happier, and a tonal progression there rose rather than fell, giving the song an airy feel. And as the sounds changed, so too did the island itself. Every single bit seemed to be glowing in a beautiful light green aura as psychic energy made repairs in time to the melody. Shattered drums of stone melded as if they'd never been broken; trees both small and large suddenly flourished, broken branches restored and life returning to their limbs; strings of ivy snaked their way into place. And the one thing truly out of place - the body of the insect that had once wreaked havoc upon the island - even found a place, psychic energy moving it over and burying it at the base of the largest tree on the island. Halfway through this new version of the song, everything was back as it should be, and an island covered in lush grass and instruments of all possible manner of nature's devising could be seen, twisted into graceful shapes unseen anywhere else in the pokémon world.

As the song entered into its second half, a strong, warm south wind suddenly picked up, blowing around them and filling the group with a sort of warmth that, it seemed to them, they hadn't felt for months or years or perhaps for the entirety of their lives. And when the wind reached Meloetta, she rose slightly in the air as the green psychic

aura enveloped her, and she began to change. First, her injuries were healed. Her face went back to its usual hue, all the cuts disappeared, her hair grew once again and her arm regained its normal shape. The light seemed to shine brightest from a point on her forehead as her gem, so long broken, finally mended itself.

It was only once the jewel was healed that she herself seemed to change while continuing her song. Her hair came undone and took on the green of the psychic aura, and her eyes, sash, and gem gained the same calm color. Her previously tutu-like dress seemed to relax, folding downward and merging into a sleeker single gown that trailed behind her somewhat. As the changes occurred and the wind continued to blow, the instruments joined in on her song one by one, so that, by the time Meloetta sank back to the ground, her long green hair now flowing behind her, her voice was joined by the single most beautiful symphony of harmonies and countermelodies and rhythms that Cody had ever heard, even back in the human world.

Only when the second, new variation of the song came to an end did Meloetta leave her mound and begin to run towards them. And as she approached, the music of the island still playing even though she had ceased to sing, the others realized that the pain had left their limbs, and all exhaustion had vanished. Yet despite their newfound health, they did not run to meet her; instead, at Bulbasaur's lead, they only got off of Lapras's back and waiting on the beach, where Lapras could still be present.

"Everyone, thank you so much!" Melody said as she finally reached them, her eyes looking to each of them in turn. "You all reminded me of who I was, you helped me defeat the creature who had set things wrong, and now I've finally recalled everything - the changing song of the world, who I am, my entire life. I'm fully back to who I once was. Really, I can't thank you enough." Her smile broadening, she added, "And now that I think about it, this world can't thank you enough, either. This is twice that all of you have helped save the world from Kyurem in some form or another, if I'm not mistaken."

"Nothin' to it," Lisa said. "Just a day in the life of Team Misfits."

Ryan laughed. "For better or for worse, that's actually getting pretty true for us."

"I think I could do with a break from this sort of thing, personally," Isola said, though she too seemed almost euphoric, energy from the song still flooding her limbs.

"I was glad to help how I could," Lapras said.

Cody nodded. "Same here. Well, I mean, it would've sucked if I'd chosen to stay in this world, only to have it destroyed by the thing we thought we stopped."

With a smile of his own, though with less raw energy than the others, Bulbasaur said, "I'm glad… I'm so glad. Because this is definitely what Vulpix would have wanted. I may not have been able to do much, but-"

"Much?" Cody asked in disbelief. "You charged down that monster and seed bombed into its canon at close range right before it could blast you! If that's not something, I don't know what is." As an afterthought, he added, "I don't think Vulpix could've possibly asked for a better partner."

Bulbasaur smiled sheepishly. "I didn't even know I could use that attack. I guess… I knew I had to do something, and instinct took over. And… Well, thanks. I just… I'm glad I could do something to live up to Vulpix's memory. Though, um, Melody-"

"Call me Meloetta now," Meloetta said. "With my memories back in full, it feels more natural now."

"Then, Meloetta… Now that you're back to yourself… Are you sure? Sure there's nothing you can do for her?"

Meloetta took a breath, her brows knitting together in concern. "I don't know… I'll see."

With a wave of her hand, Vulpix was lifted from Lapras's back by Meloetta's green psychic energy and deposited gently onto the ground in front of Meloetta. She knelt down in front of Vulpix and, like before, placed her flat hands on Vulpix's forehead, her eyes closed as she concentrated.

It wasn't long before she opened her eyes and looked to Bulbasaur. "I'm sorry, but there's still nothing. She's gone, entirely. I can't sense her Spirit anywhere. I can't think of how her body is remaining alive, except as a testament to the extreme strength of Spirit she must have had while alive. Bulbasaur… Will you be okay?"

Bulbasaur's earlier smile had faded, but he didn't hesitate when he answered, "I will. For Vulpix's sake as well as my own, I want to live on and experience the world that we saved."

Though still sorrowful in expression, Meloetta said, "I'm glad to hear it."

"Is there any chance I could ask a favor of you?" he asked her, suddenly, as if afraid he might miss the opportunity if he waited.

"Anything at all," Meloetta said. "Truly, anything I can possibly do."

Bulbasaur looked at his partner, but he waited a long while before responding; the others waited patiently, their own energy tempered by both recognition of Bulbasaur's sorrow and amazement at his sudden calm in the face of it. "When… When we leave the island, could Vulpix stay here?" he eventually asked. "Since she's not really dead, I can't bury her. And I don't think there's any place better than here for her to stay. I think she'd love to listen to your songs, if any part of her can still hear them."

"Of course," Meloetta answered immediately. "I owe her just as much as I owe you, so I'd be happy to. After all, it was her song that…" Meloetta didn't seem to realize that she'd stopped speaking as she suddenly went deep into thought, her eyes seemingly focused somewhere far in the distance.

Everyone was perplexed by her sudden contemplation, though for a while, no one wanted to disturb her thoughts; eventually, it was left to Lapras to ask, "Something on your mind?"

Meloetta suddenly snapped back to her senses, a joyful expression suddenly plastered on her face. "Bulbasaur, there's still one last chance!" She said as she spun around and began to run back to the center of the island, Vulpix levitating just behind her. "That song was *her* song, and it was the song of the land as well! Maybe her Spirit synched with the Spirit of the land enough! Some memory of her Spirit might remain within the Spirit of the land, still surviving, and - oh, maybe it just needs to be reminded who it is!" she shouted back as Bulbasaur and Team Misfits rushed after her. "But of course, the land's song is different now, so *her* old song is unique to her and not shared between her and the land, so just *maybe* it can bring her back!"

They reached the center mound, and Meloetta placed Vulpix's ever-sleeping body down at the center, and before Bulbasaur and the others had even caught up, Meloetta began to sing the song that Vulpix has known all of her pokémon life. The trees and rocks and plants and other instruments stopped playing the new song of the land and began into the old one, joining in with lonesome harmonies, adding to the emotion of Meloetta's voice as she sang like she never had before, using both her voice and the voice of her island not for the good of the land and all in it, but rather for the good of one individual: a single, scraggly-tailed vulpix, a human-turned-pokémon who had given her all to save a world that had given her both the greatest trials and the greatest joys of her life.

Bulbasaur watched expectantly throughout, his eyes riveted on the gentle rise of fall of Vulpix's torso, waiting for some telltale sign of something that he almost didn't dare to hope in anymore. He'd finally accepted her death before the battle here on this island; he'd accepted the prospect of living on without her by his side. He knew it couldn't work, knew that Meloetta was giving him false hope, knew

that he shouldn't believe that the world was kind enough to repay the one who had done so much-

The song ended, and the rise and fall of her chest stopped completely.

His eyes widened and he rushed up to Vulpix's side, extending a vine and shaking her gently. "Vulpix, Vulpix! Don't… Don't die on me now! Something happened, you're back, right? You have to be! Vulpix, please! Vulpix!"

No breath filled her lungs, and like so many other times in this never ending day, Bulbasaur's eyes welled up. "I never gave up on you, but I was willing to live on for the both of us! And now, you… Vulpix! Vulpix, please, I'm begging you!"

The south wind blew around them, rustling Vulpix's fur, but still she did not respond.

Meloetta began to call out to Vulpix as well. "Vulpix, you just about made it. You're practically here!" she said urgently. "Bulbasaur's waiting on you. You can't let him down, I know you wouldn't do that."

Cody and the others watched the scene in horror, not sure whether to hope for the best or fear the worst.

"Vulpix… Vulpix…" Bulbasaur's cries were weaker now, muffled as he nuzzled his head against her side. "Vulpix…"

Bulbasaur felt the slightest of extra pressure against his forehead, but he stayed where he was, head pressed against her. He knew he'd imagined it, knew that she wasn't really breathing again. One last chance, Meloetta had said - really, it was all too good to be true. There had been no chance, Meloetta had said that several times in this day along. There had never been any chance-

The pressure again, this time stronger and unmistakable. Bulbasaur practically leapt to his feet and moved in front of Vulpix, so that his

face was only inches from her.

"Vulpix! Vulpix! Come on, now!" he shouted desperately. "Please!"

Vulpix took another deep breath and, weakly, her eyelids fluttered open. She said nothing and seemed to be looking through Bulbasaur as he held his breath. She exhaled, then inhaled again, and her eyes focused.

"Bulbasaur?" she asked quietly, not so much as lifting her head from the ground. "Bulbasaur… What's wrong?"

Tears now streaming freely down Bulbasaur's face and a smile like that of the happiest pokémon in the world, he tried to respond, but found his words swallowed by sobs of joy.

"Bulbasaur, what's going on? Is something wrong?" Vulpix asked with concern as she tried to get to her feet, though her muscles didn't seem to be working right quite yet. She barely got her body an inch off the ground before her muscles gave out and she fell back down once again.

Bulbasaur shook his head in answer to her question, and after a few moments, he managed to hold back the sobs for long enough to choke out the only words that he could possibly think to say.

"Vulpix… You're alive," he said in barely more than a whisper, his awe fully audible. "You're really, really alive!"

There's only one thing I have to say: HOLY MOTHER OF MEW THIS CHAPTER WAS LONG.

I should split it up. I really should… But I've been planning a 40 chapter fic (minus April Fools, Prologue, and Epilogue) from the beginning, and I'm so OCD about it that at this point, I'm sort of like what the hell, might as well keep it as is. Hopefully, if you've enjoyed

the story enough to read this far, you're happy that there's so much stuff going down in your last actual chapter.

Anyway, my actual final author's note will be after the epilogue, which I'm posting at the same time as this chapter. Talk to y'all then. ^_^

Epilogue

What is it that defines a hero?

Perhaps it is impossible to know. But who the heroes are, and what their stories are - that we can understand with certainty.

In the years that followed, the tales of those who had saved the world from certain destruction spread throughout the land in what became known as the Legend of the Heroes. In order to preserve the truth of the stories, those who had witnessed the events of those times came up with ways for the stories to be passed down. Guildmembers, friends, and those who had met the humans and their teams soon began looking to the stars, making them into reminders for the generations to come. It was thus that the stories began to spread across the land, even though regionally, some were told more often than others.

In the west, a certain charmeleon did all he could to point out the constellation of the Six Tails to all those he met, claiming that he had helped out the vulpix of legend many times.

In the South, countless pokémon looked up to constellation of the Red Feather and remembered the amiable archen who, before returning to his own world, had finally spread his wings and flown.

In the East, Team Misfits spent several years greatly exaggerating their tales as the bragged of the Zag constellation, a jagged band of stars that stretched across one section of sky.

A particular valley continued the story of the deerling who had saved them, claiming the Deerling constellation as their own story to pass down to future generations; and in the North as well, that same constellation was popular, because those who sympathized with the well-loved Guildmaster Abomasnow saw in his story a mirror of the deerling's, both of whom had suffered under Kyurem's control.

Yet across all regions of the land, no constellation was more well-known than that of a pidgey in flight, her wing tip touching the sharp star-point of a scyther's blade. It was so popular in part because everyone had a friend of a friend who had met one of the two traveling pokémon in their respective journeys, and also in part due to the fact that everyone who had ever loved could sympathize with the sorrow of their tale. For no one else could think of a more tragic story than that of two souls in love, both of whom had survived death in one world only to die so soon after having found each other once again.

Even after all the other tales of the Legend of the Heroes had passed into the obscurity, even after the tale of Alexa and Cecil had faded in its details… Even then, when no one remembered why the constellation was said to depict a pidgey and a scyther, it remained forever known as the constellation of the Star-Crossed Lovers.

Who is the truest friend?

For those who have a true friend, the answer to this question is clear.

"Tonight's the night, isn't it?" Isola asked. She and Cody were sitting on Lapras's back as he drifted along, all three of them watching the light of reflected stars skipping from wave to wave on the dark ocean beneath them.

"Yeah, tonight's the night," Cody responded. "Feels like so long ago that we beat Kyurem, doesn't it?"

"That's because it has been a long time," Lapras reminded them, looking back at them with a smile. "Long lived though I am, even I count a decade to be a sizeable span of time."

"A decade?" Cody asked, as if surprised. "Ten years sounds like so much longer when you put it like that."

The three drifted along in silence for a time, and as they did, it would've been hard to tell that even a year had passed since playing their part in restoring Meloetta to her land. Perhaps Lapras's age showed a bit more in his face and weathered shell; perhaps the contentment that Cody and Isola shared as they sat side by side had a different quality than it had all those years ago, when Cody had been getting used to his life as a pokémon. Yet other than those minor differences, they were still much the same as they had been then.

After a while, Isola sighed. "I do wish we could have made it back for the gathering this year."

"And hear Lisa complain more about how we ought to go ahead and evolve? No thanks," Cody said with a smirk, though there was something more to his tone than simple annoyance. Perhaps in acknowledgement to that more hidden part of his sentiment, he continued, "Besides, we told them that we would be going farther than ever before this year, and that we probably wouldn't be back this year. We've always got next year."

Isola smiled and looked away from the ocean, instead turning her attention to the true, unwavering stars above. "I suppose you're right…" she said, somewhat sleepily. "Next year, then. And until then, we'll have to keep on exploring, keep on finding the most amazing places possible, so that by the time we finish talking about them, Lisa won't even have time to criticize the two of us still being unevolved. Everyone agree?"

Lapras let out a chuckle. "I'm with you as far as the ocean can carry me, though I'm hardly in need of an evolution."

Cody snuggled a little closer to Isola, appreciating the warm touch of her feathers. He joined her in looking up at the starry sky above and said, "As if that's even a question. Of course I agree. I'm with you in every adventure we can find."

What is the soul?

It is the Spirit. It is who we are, it is what we do. It is the world we live in, it is the friends we make. It is that which cannot be seen or touched or sensed in any way, so it is nothing; and yet it is the thing that fills all that we see and touch and sense, so it is everything.

Emma's head buzzed with thoughts as she left the old stone building, brushing her short brown hair out of her face as she turned her experiment's results over and over again in her head. Ever since securing her research professorship at the best scientific university she could find, she'd made little to no progress in her multiple dimension postulations. Her own firsthand experiences had given her few leads on how to approach such a theoretical topic, meaning that she had to rely on her own wits and hard work, just as she always had as both a human and pokémon. Yet the research had been slow, and she'd nearly lost her funding on multiple occasions.

But today, things were changing. She'd had a breakthrough, exactly the sort of breakthrough that was needed. It was all she could do to prevent herself from skipping through campus. If her results today help up in the face of the scientific community, then this could be a start of a whole new phase of multi-dimensional research, the first step to reopening the gateway that she had passed through all those years ago.

She was so ecstatic that she didn't realize how late it was until a flash of light and the distant rumble of thunder caused her to look up and see dark, heavy clouds in the night sky, their bulging shapes illuminated dimly by the light of the city all around her. The rain that soon followed quickly brought her to her senses, and she knew she should hurry to her car.

Yet Emma couldn't bring herself to leave just yet. Instead, she stood there on the sidewalk, staring up at the sky through glasses now useless thanks to the water collecting on them. As she stood there, the rain stopped for the briefest of moments, a break opening up in the clouds for just long enough for her to see a single star in the

distance. Then, in another moment, a bolt of lightning jumped from one side of the gap to the other, and the clouds closed and the deluge continued once more.

The rain and the lightning did nothing to dampen Emma's mood. Quite the contrary, the sight of the lightning served only to encourage her. For it brought back memories of an argumentative galvantula and a small, secluded valley she had once called home.

Emma smiled and, not at all diminished by the pouring rain, she muttered, "Don't worry, Kara. I promised. Maybe one day soon, we'll see each other again."

What becomes of a soul devoid of purpose?

Such a thing does not exist. The soul always has a purpose, whether it knows it or not. And when it does lose sight of that which had previously given meaning to its existence, it does the most logical thing it can do: it searches for a more memorable meaning to live, a more lasting purpose to pursue.

Though it was late in the night, the sound of festivities could still be heard echoing across the Battle Grounds as guildmembers and regular pokémon alike celebrated. The reasons for this celebration were many, at least this year. There was, of course, the real reason why they were there, with it being the annual celebration of the defeat of Kyurem. Being the tenth anniversary, the parties needed no encouragement to be extra boisterous. But only adding to the energy in the air was the surprise announcement during the day by all the guildmasters and deputies, who had said that they would be stepping down in the next year, all of them having agreed that it was time to let a new group of pokémon lead.

Secluded from the bulk of the celebrations were nine pokémon. One of these nine was tucked deep in her mother's pouch, asleep; the others simply looked up at the stars, either too tired from the night's

festivities to speak or too stunned by the sudden announcement of their promotions to know what to say.

"Guildmasters… It's hard to even imagine us leading the guilds," Zeke finally said, breaking the silence.

"Ha! Speak for yourself!" boomed the now fully-grown kangaskhan called Lisa, not at all worried about waking the child in her pouch. "I've been waiting for Elgyem to get tired of the guild and hand it over. Took him long enough! About time he named me guildmaster."

The forever dirty Cinccino sitting on her shoulder let out a sigh, though there was a bemused smile on his face. "And with me as deputy and you as guildmaster, that means I'm the only one with enough brains to actually keep the guild functioning… I haven't even started, and I think I'm starting to see why Deputy Swadloon is so grumpy all the time."

"And what's that supposed to mean? That I don't have enough brains to do run a guild?" Lisa challenged.

"Oh, no, not at all, *Guildmaster* Lisa," he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Meanwhile, from nearer to the ground, Kara's voice could be heard as she grumbled, "I just don't see why you get to be Guildmaster while I'm stuck as Deputy, Zeke. I'm clearly the better candidate to lead."

"Well, I *have* been with the guild the longest," Zeke pointed out, not at all bothered by her typical critical attitude. "And I'm the better battler, to boot."

Kara began to argue vehemently against that, but in the meantime, it seemed one of the other pairs had overheard their conversation. Turning to look up at her partner, Kuro the houndoom said, "Aiden, you don't mind that I was given the guildmaster position, do you?"

"Not at all," the arcanine said, his tail wagging contentedly. "You've always been team leader, after all. It only makes sense."

"You're sure you don't mind?" Kuro asked again.

"Positive," he said. "Guildmember or deputy or whatever, I don't care so long as I'm helping the guild."

Kuro let out a relieved puff of smoke, then looked at the last two new leaders. "And what about you, Sage and Vulpix? What do you think of all this? You've been awfully quiet throughout all this."

Sage, who was by far the largest pokémon present since few pokémon could match a venusaur in size, let out a deep chuckle. "You know Guildmaster Emolga… She was much too excited about all this to keep it a secret. We knew about a month ago that the guildmasters were planning it, so it didn't come as a surprise tonight."

"That doesn't answer my question, though," Kuro said with a smile. "How do you feel about becoming co-guildmasters? It's a lot of responsibility to take on."

Vulpix, despite the name she still went by, was a vulpix no longer. Just like her partner, she had chosen to evolve. Yet, despite all the change evolution had brought, her tails - nine of them, now - still retained their crumpled appearance, a memento of the fight with the weather gods in these very Battle Grounds all those years ago.

"How do I feel about it, I wonder?" the ninetails pondered aloud, her tails swaying gently behind her, occasionally brushing up against Sage's side. When she'd first woken up in this world, she'd had no idea how to feel about anything, nonetheless something as big as this. But now, it took her only a few seconds to think of her response. She smiled as she looked up at the stars, and leaning a little closer to the venusaur next to her, she answered Kuro.

"Guildmasters or not, we're still Team Rebirth," she said. "As long as that's still true, I think we can take whatever responsibility the world throws at us, just as we always have."

What is Fate?

It is the past, the present, the future. It defends that which must always be, and it is the force that most challenges us. It is a tale told of every small decision and every world-changing action. And, perhaps most importantly, it is the story of heroes, and of friends, and of souls both lost and found.

"Everyone, this may be the single most exciting match we have ever seen here at the Unova Pokémon League!" the announcer shouted, his voice blaring out of the speakers even over the roar of the thousands of people filling the seats, all hear to what was being called the battle of the decade. "Despite having only five pokémon with him, he defeated the Elite Four with ease and now faces a pokémon few have ever had the chance to battle - Alder's most fearsome asset and friend, the mighty Volcarona! With his only remaining pokémon already tired from taking out Druddigon, does our wannabe Unova Champion really have a chance?"

Max rolled a pokéball around in his hand nervously, though a slight smile betrayed the confidence he had deep down. Ever since starting his journey as a trainer, he had put his all into everything, never backing down from a challenge. And now, his efforts and that of his friends, his pokémon, were going to pay off. Luxray, Galvantula, Arcanine, and Houndoom had all fought valiantly, desiring victory just as much as their trainer; now, it was Archeops's turn to shine.

"Many have been astounded at Challenger Max's quick rise in competitive battling, and over these past years he's gained the title of 'the Pokémon Whisperer' for his almost uncanny ability for encouraging and training his pokémon! But tonight, will that be

enough for him to beat Alder, who is himself said to be like a brother to his pokémon?"

The smile on Max's face grew as he listened to the announcer and wiped the sweat from his brow. He wanted the battle to start already, but of course, before the judge could call the match's start, the announcers were paid to tell the crowd everything they already knew, just to get them riled up as much as possible. But so long as he had to wait, Max just had to laugh at the announcer's words, just as he did whenever he heard his so-called title. Little did anyone know that once upon a time, he really had been able to talk to pokémon and that he himself had even *been* a pokémon. It was that fact that gave him such a skill for understanding what pokémon were thinking and feeling, and it was this skill that gave him an advantage when teaching them new moves.

He was glad for this advantage, because he wanted power to equal the confidence he had gained during his time spent in the pokémon world. For so long there, he'd had the power to protect others, but not the courage. Now, he had the courage, and it was only the power he lacked. He'd already done a lot with his status as an eight-badge trainer, and when faced with the corruption that oftentimes so plagued the world, he found that his pokémon were more than willing to lend their power to try to set things right. As Champion, he could do even more good for Unova and the world. That's why he'd aimed for such a lofty goal in the first place.

"You can still back down if you want!" Alder called out amiably from across the field, his voice ringing out over the speakers and - to Max's amusement - interrupting the announcer. "From what I've heard, you like your pokémon enough to not want to see them hurt! Am I right?"

"Back down?" Max shouted back, following the shout with a laugh. "Maybe you haven't heard, but Max the 'Pokémon Whisperer' doesn't run away from anything! Of course, I'm not the one battling… Archeops, you're looking a bit tired. Feel like calling it a night?"

In response, the archeops let out an undaunted cry and breathed a torrent of purple flames into the air, the column of fire rising high above the stadium lights before dying out in the darkness of the night sky.

Max's grin grew ever broader. "Alder, looks like you're out of luck, because my best pokémon still wants to fight."

Alder laughed heartily. "Glad to hear it, kid! Then let's make this a match to remember!"

The announcer, seeing this as the end of their banter, let his voice ring out once more. "And with that, I give the speakers over to the head battle judge to begin the match!"

The uniformed judge being referred to stepped up to the very edge of the battlefield. In the remaining moments before the referee could call the start of the battle, Max looked up to the night sky. The brightness of the stadium lights made any sight of the stars impossible. Yet he knew they were up there, somewhere. Though they weren't the same stars as the ones that shone on his friends back in the pokémon world, he knew that his friends - Zeke, Kara, Aiden, and Kuro - were out there, somewhere.

"Let the battle begin!"

Max snapped his attention back to the battlefield and called out his first attack. He was fighting for the sister he'd failed long ago, for the friends he'd likely never see again, for the new friends he'd made since returning to this world, and for all the friends he had yet to meet. That was why he smiled as he called his attacks one after another, the light of victory already in his eyes.

Because, with all of them as his reasons to fight, there was no way he would allow himself to lose.

Closing Author's Note

Okay, I'm not doing a separate chapter for the final author's note this time, because I don't have nearly as much to say. Anyway, here goes nothin'!

First of all, I think a big thanks is in order.

As all of you should already know, I can't thank you enough for just reading this. Seeing my story visitor counts rise to the level they're at now has done so much to encourage me and keep me writing, even when I feel like I'm hitting a wall or I'm writing terribly or when I'm getting flat out tired of trying to juggle life and writing. So to each and every one of you, I offer my sincere thanks. I likely wouldn't have the motivation to continue writing these fics without knowing that there are people out there invested enough to want to read more. And even though this and my other stories are "just" fanfics, the fact that I've been able to see them through to their respective ends is one of the aspects of myself that I'm proudest of. I couldn't have done it without seeing my story alert, story visitor, and story favorite counts go up, so thanks so much for your support. ^_^

Of course, I offer double the heaping helping of thanks to all of you beautiful people who have not only devoted hours of your time (and, for some of you, sleepless nights) to this fic, but who also made the added effort to tell me that you're enjoying it, or that there's something I could've done better, or anything else like that. You've helped me to improve, and you've helped to encourage me in a way that the raw numbers of visitors can't even possibly get at. I sank hundreds of hours of my life into this story, and it's people like you who make me feel downright glad that I did.

Now that all that is said, here's my attempt at a vanity plea.

First, most basic thing that has less to do with vanity and more to do with becoming a better writer… I'd love to hear what you think about the ending, as well as the story as a whole now that it's over! Likes, dislikes, completely frustrating moments (like having an 11,000 word final chapter…), things you noticed I could do better - anything at all that comes to mind, let me know.

As for indulging my vanity, let me just say this. Seeing email notifications about people favoriting my stories, people favoriting me as an author, and people putting me on their author alert list are all things that make me happy. So if you think I deserve it, favorite or author alert away! And if you think I deserve even more than just that, you're always more than welcome to spread the word about my fics to fellow lovers of pokémon. However, these being vanity requests, I'll leave it at that and not go on and on about it.

So, the big question, for some of you at least: what does Arrowfoot have planned next?

Well… Sorry to disappoint, but at the moment, nothing. I've been writing pokémon fanfics for almost the entirety of the last two and a half years, and I've been writing fanfics more generally for pretty much exactly four years now. Quite frankly, even though I love it, I need a break. I've got a heavy college course load to deal with next semester, and in addition to that, I really want to focus on my language practice, since I'll be studying abroad in Japan next year (WHICH I'M SUPER EXCITED FOR). So at least during this next semester, I don't plan on starting anything new. I may continue my Nuzlocke fic, which is a minimal effort fic at best and thus I don't really care about spewing out a short bad chapter here and there. Plus, having any fic unfinished on here bugs me, so I want to finish it sometime.

As for the more distant future? I don't really know. I've been toying with the idea of a digimon fic for a LONG time, but whether it'll ever get enough of a plot for me to want to write it is debatable. Plus, I know I've sort of got a bit of a pokémon fanbase on here now, and I don't want to alienate you all with other fandom fics. I might get inspired by Gen VI (which, if the Interenet is correct, might be getting its announcement tomorrow!), or… Okay, I almost hesitate to say this in fear of getting your hopes up, but… While I was writing this epilogue, I had the very beginnings of a spark for a new fic in this LoL/DoW continuity. So I'm not saying this will likely happen, only that the possibility is there when it wasn't before a few hours ago.

Though you shouldn't expect much from me at least until summer, if you'd like to keep in touch with me, feel free! I'd love to hear from you, even when I'm not in the middle of a pokémon fic. There are a couple other ways you can keep up with my life other than just messaging me on here, just so you know. First off, I'm planning on using "Taking the Plunge," my collection of short pokémon stories, in order to keep people updated on my pokémon fanfic plans specifically. If I have something I want to say, I'll write up a short pokémon fic, then stick the relevant news onto the end in my author's note. I probably won't be posting up many (if any) pokémon short stories other than when I have some news, so if you want to keep up, add that fic to your story alert list (which sounds like a desperate ploy to get more fic watchers… But seriously, this site has no good way to otherwise keep in touch). Alternately, if any of you are on deviantArt, I occasionally talk about my life on there via my journal. DeviantArt is also how I keep up with a number of my Internet friends, so it's another good way to keep in touch. ^_^

I think that's about all I have to say. Again, all of you - thank you so much for reading!